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When Communities Lead

How local actors are redefining development and why the world must follow.

COLOPHON

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EDITORIAL

Marc Broere

Eunice Mwaura

When the System Contracts, Local Leadership Steps Forward

On 24th October, at the University of Nairobi, the room filled with a kind of urgency rarely felt in development events. Grassroots organisers, youth leaders, NGO staff, researchers, policymakers, and students came together to confront a question that had suddenly become unavoidable: what happens when global development budgets shrink?

The stories shared were raw and immediate. Projects halted mid-way. Communities left without services. Local organisations stretched to breaking point. Trust, the currency that underpins all development work, eroding as promises can no longer be fulfilled.

Yet, beneath this discomfort, something unexpected surfaced: clarity.

The joint paper '***We the People: Reimagining the Future of Development Cooperation***' shows that the budget cuts, while undeniably harmful, have also exposed a deeper truth.

They have highlighted the limits of a system that has long been donor-centric, while simultaneously revealing the quiet strength, creativity, and legitimacy of local actors who have been leading far more than the global system has acknowledged.

In other words, the cuts are not only a setback; they may be the catalyst the sector needed.

For years, localisation and Locally Led Development (LLD) **have appeared in declarations,** strategies, and conference speeches. Commitments such as the Donor Statement on LLD and the Principles for Locally Led Adaptation outlined what a power shift should look like. Yet, practice lagged behind policy, slowed by bureaucracy, institutional comfort, and fears of letting go.

Now, however, donors absorbed by domestic pressures are turning inward, INGOs are reorganising, and the 'centre' of the system feels less stable. The Nairobi dialogue showed that, as the top contracts, the bottom (local communities, local organisations, local knowledge) is stepping forward with renewed force.

Participants described how they are mobilising local resources, strengthening community-based networks, forming South~~S~~outh collaborations, and reclaiming ownership of development agendas. Not because donors demanded localisation, but because necessity demanded it.

This shift, quiet and often invisible, is the heart of our upcoming special edition on *Localisation and Locally Led Development*. Six years after our *Shift the Power* special, the question is no longer whether localisation is needed, but whether the sector will finally confront the internal barriers that prevent a genuine power shift.

The Nairobi event makes it clear: the moment is here. The budget cuts have widened the cracks in the old architecture, but they have also illuminated the path forward. Local leadership is not emerging despite the crises; it is emerging through them.

This special will explore that transition: the breakthroughs, the dilemmas, the resistance, and the courage required to build a development ecosystem led by those closest to the issues.

As one participant in Nairobi put it: 'This is not just a crisis. It is the opening we needed.' The question now is whether the global sector has the humility and imagination to walk through that opening together.

Marc Broere and Eunice Mwaura

From ‘Shift the Power’ to ‘Locally Led Development’

Text by Marc Broere
Illustrations by Abdulwadud Bayo

Six years after Vice Versa published its special edition on ‘*Shift the Power*,’ the concept of localisation has evolved from a progressive idea into a widely accepted principle in the international development sector. Around the world, and in the Netherlands as well, efforts are underway to give local communities and organisations more voice and ownership. It is no longer just about providing aid, but about empowering local leaders and building on existing initiatives. This special edition explores the progress made, the remaining challenges, and how psychological, cultural, and structural factors influence the practice of Locally Led Development.

In 2019, *Vice Versa* published a special edition titled ‘*Shift the Power: Local Ownership of the Global Agenda*.’ At the time, calls to rebalance power in development cooperation were growing louder, with Southern organisations demanding not only to receive aid but also to have a say in shaping programmes.

This required greater equality in decision-making and new funding opportunities, such as local fundraising in Southern countries, which could strengthen civil society and reduce dependence on international NGOs—often labelled as ‘foreign agents’ by authoritarian governments. A similar debate emerged in academia, with *Decolonising Knowledge* becoming a prominent topic at universities and research institutes.

In recent years, localisation has gained broad acceptance in the development sector, no longer the domain of a small group of frontrunners. More and more organisations are embracing the principles of *Locally Led Development* or *Locally Led Approaches*.

These approaches prioritise the needs of the people the aid is intended for, building on existing local initiatives rather than introducing external projects or technologies. The most important currency is not money, but ownership, leadership, and mutual trust.

A major international milestone was the *Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development*, which was adopted at a donor conference in Geneva in December 2022. The statement brought together 21 bilateral donors and 27 major philanthropic foundations, all committing to place localisation at the heart of development cooperation

Around the same time, the *Principles for Locally Led Adaptation*i— nitiated by the International Institute for Environment and Development and the World Resources Institutеu— nderlined that local communities, who bear the brunt of climate change, must be given greater power and resources to strengthen their resilience.

More than one hundred organisations, including governments and NGOs, endorsed the document. In the Netherlands, localisation has also been taken seriously. The June 2025 parliamentary letter on the policy framework for cooperation with civil society organisations in development aid (2026ƨ 030) places strong emphasis on localisation.

The government emphasises the importance of local ownership: civil society organisations and communities in low- and middle-income countries should have greater control over programme choices and implementation. The emphasis is increasingly on strengthening local organisations, while complex, multilayered partnerships are being discouraged.

At the same time, Dutch and international NGOs continue to have a role to playp— articularly where their expertise adds value or where local partners are not yet fully equipped to meet certain requirements. The aim is to strike a balance between direct support to local actors and the continued contribution of international knowledge and experience.

Six years after the *Shift the Power* special, it is time for a new edition that reviews the progress of localisation. *Locally Led Development* has become a widely accepted approach to tackling major global challenges more effectively.

Many organisations and donors are working on policy development, internal system adjustments, and implementing projects differently than before. This special edition features background stories and reports on successful examples of localisation that can inspire others.

At the same time, it explores the obstacles organisations face in taking meaningful steps and whether the international aid architecture is set up to allow letting go and taking risks.

Finally, the psychological aspect of localisation is addressed. Kees Zevenbergen, former CEO of Cordaid, explains: ‘Localisation requires a deep understanding and lived sense that we are temporary supporters, and that Southern partners are the owners of both the problem and the solution. We provide a temporary boost.

‘It takes time for this insight to settle in the hearts and minds of many development workers. At the same time, Southern partners must adjust as well, often feeling that the donor controls the funding and must be kept satisfied, making honest conversations challenging.’

The Next Era of Development

A special partnership between two people from different cultures, united by shared values. What makes Malih Ole Kaunga (Impact Kenya) and Betteke de Gaay Fortman (Tunafasi) such an effective team? Here, they each reflect on one another and share their common vision for a new approach to development.

Text by Marc Broere

Betteke de Gaay Fortman

'Ole and I first met through the *Reversing the Flow* programme—an innovative Dutch government initiative in which seventy percent of funds go directly to local communities to support their own climate adaptation solutions. Ole represents Impact Kenya, while I work with Friendship in Bangladesh.

'When I travelled to Kenya, I was eager to visit Impact Kenya because I had heard they were a frontrunner in direct community funding. Meeting Ole confirmed that impression. I immediately felt drawn to collaborate with him. I recognised the activism in him—something we both share, coming from activist families.

'Our first conversation about development confirmed how aligned we were. I am deeply inspired by Joseph Ki-Zerbo, the Burkinabé historian and philosopher whose motto was: '*People are not developed; they develop themselves*.' People may need a helping hand from the outside for a time, but ultimately, they must decide for themselves how to use it.

'When Ole came to the Netherlands to strengthen Impact Kenya's presence and build partnerships, he asked if I could support him through my company, Tunafasi. Tunafasi's mission is to empower local organisations in Africa and Asia that demonstrate strong leadership and a clear vision, exactly what Ole Kaunga and Impact Kenya represent.

'I am proud to work with him, and in the spirit of '*reversing the flow*,' I am actually paid by Impact Kenya for my work—the opposite of the usual arrangement. We are living in an era that calls for a new attitude.

'For too long, Western NGOs and development professionals have imposed solutions on their partners in the Global South. Now is the time to be humble, to listen, and to be flexible with financing. This is no longer about pushing our own agendas; it is about following the priorities of local organisations and adopting a service-oriented mindset.

'Equal collaboration requires openness, flexibility, and mutual trust. It means daring to speak honestly with each other, listening carefully, and sharing challenges when they arise. As a development professional from the West, I know I still have a role to play.

'This week, for example, we have important meetings in the Netherlands with potential partners for Impact Kenya. Without my presence, these meetings would be more difficult to arrange—and this is where I can add real value. In any collaboration, it is important to recognise the unique contributions that each party can bring.

In any collaboration, it is important to recognise the unique contributions that each party can bring.

'Localisation is crucial, but it must be done thoughtfully. It is not simply about opening a local office in Nairobi; we must ask ourselves what value that really adds. For me, it means directly supporting organisations founded and led by local people.

'Examples include Impact Kenya, ADED in the DR Congo, and the Pastoral Women's Council led by Maanda Ngoitiko in Tanzania—all rooted in marginalised communities. Localisation is about connecting with these groups as directly as possible, with minimal layers in between.

'It is about trusting that they know what is right for them, and how to achieve sustainable progress in their lives and their environment. This shift also means letting go of our own institutional interests. For many organisations in the Netherlands, it will require downsizing.

'One of the biggest barriers to localisation today is the self-interest of development organisations that have strayed from their original mission. When many of these organisations were founded forty or fifty years ago, their purpose was clear and noble.

'Today, too many are focused on sustaining themselves at home rather than maximising their impact abroad or truly supporting marginalised communities. If I were shaping Dutch development policy, I would adopt the *Reversing the Flow model*: direct and flexible funding to communities so they can address their most urgent challenges themselves.

'This approach empowers local organisations to hold their own governments accountable and take charge of their futures. With such direct funding, the role of Dutch NGOs would naturally evolve—and those unwilling to transform would eventually fade away.

'I increasingly hear the phrase "*growing smaller strategy*," and I believe this is the way forward. Here in the West, we must operate as lean as possible while maximising our impact in Africa and Asia.'

Malih Ole Kaunga

'I first met Betteke when she was on holiday in Kenya with her family, visiting Samburu in the north. What immediately struck me was how easily they interacted and communicated with the local community.

As we spoke, I learned about her family's history, including the time they spent living in Zambia during their childhood, when their father worked at a university there. I quickly thought, *I can work with her*.

'She clearly understands Africa and approaches things with an open and flexible mindset. I also felt that we shared a common understanding of the world's real challenges and how they should be addressed.

'That is why I chose to form a mutual partnership with her organisation. I see Betteke as a true ally, and I am always inspired when I meet people who believe in the same cause and share the same vision.

'My own ideology is rooted in the wisdom of local communities—knowledge that is rarely written down but has guided them for generations. It is about shared leadership, shared resources, and inclusive decision-making. These are the values I hold most strongly.

'For many people, the word indigenous still carries an association with being 'primitive.' Yet, looking at the state of the world today, it is often the so-called modern and educated societies that are causing the most harm, destroying

This is not simply a job; it is more than missionary work.

ecosystems and driving climate change.

'In contrast, indigenous communities hold unique and time-tested knowledge about living in balance with nature. They take only what they need from the environment and safeguard it for future generations. Unfortunately, this wisdom is often overlooked or dismissed under the weight of Western knowledge and dominance.

'Around seventy percent of the world's biodiversity is found on indigenous territories~~a~~—testament to how effectively these communities protect forests, care for their land, and live in harmony with nature. And yet, they are still seen by many as people who 'need to be developed.'

'The challenges indigenous communities face are often caused by external forces. Their lands are taken away, and they must cope with the effects of climate change—a crisis largely driven by industrialised countries with polluting economies.

'Education is another struggle. Their traditional knowledge is rarely recognised or valued, and they are compelled to follow systems based on Western models. They are even told that their traditional ways of life, such as pastoralism, are outdated or harmful, and that they should stop moving with their cattle.

'Yet nomadic lifestyles are actually one of the most sustainable ways to care for the earth. Despite this, indigenous communities are rarely treated as equal partners in dialogue. Today, nearly everything, including development cooperation, is framed within a capitalist mindset.

'Even clean and renewable energy projects are often built on land taken from indigenous peoples. Africa, in particular, is increasingly viewed not as a continent of communities but as a market for renewable energy or as a source of raw materials for the West's energy transition.

'**This capitalist approach is also evident in** how some local organisations are overfinanced by Western donors. I have seen many promising organisations collapse because they felt unable to say no to excessive funding~~f~~— unding that forced them to shift their priorities to match those of the donor.

'In the end, it was the donor who unintentionally destroyed them. At the same time, I see many organisations thriving simply because they know how to write compelling reports and say exactly what donors want to hear. Donors often continue funding them without assessing their true capacity or considering how these organisations wish to grow.

'I have watched organisations with genuine visions and bold dreams disappear because they trusted donors who ultimately pushed them in a different direction than they had planned. When I do not have a good feeling about a donor, I say so respectfully~~a~~— nd I make a point of explaining why we do things the way we do.

'It is essential to train more young leaders who share this philosophy. Together, they can form a movement of people committed to doing things differently. The moment this work is treated as just a job, its true purpose is lost. This is not simply a job; it is more than missionary work.

'**I see today's system of development** cooperation as a pipeline full of leaks. For me, localisation should be a pipeline with no leakage—where funding flows directly from its source to the communities for whom it is intended. Right now, leaks occur at every level.

'The most frustrating part is that we already know how to fix these leaks. We have the tools and the knowledge to seal them, but the sector is not yet ready to make the changes. Instead of repairing the system, too often we simply replace the water that has leaked out.

'If I could shape development cooperation policy, my first request would be for governments and major donors to truly listen~~n~~— ot just to large development organisations and Western NGOs, but to alternative voices and to the communities themselves, as the *Reversing the Flow* model does.

'I would also urge everyone working in this sector to take an honest look at their own 'leaks'~~t~~— o identify where resources are being lost and take concrete steps to stop them.'

BIO

Malih Ole Kaunga
Malih Ole Kaunga has long been a leading advocate for the rights, dignity, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, particularly pastoralist communities in Kenya. He is the founder and director of IMPACT (Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation), where he has worked to amplify community voices, advance land rights, and foster peaceful, inclusive societies. Recognised nationally and internationally, Malih has been an active voice in global conversations on human rights, climate justice, and sustainable development.

Betteke de Gaay Fortman
Betteke de Gaay Fortman has many years of experience leading philanthropic initiatives that improve the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families in Nepal and Latin America. In 2019, she founded Tunafasi, through which she supports local organisations in achieving their missions—currently in Bangladesh, DR Congo, and Kenya. She is also the author of 'People Develop Themselves: Limitations and Possibilities of Aid from Afar.'

Localisation: We All Want It, Yet We're Getting in Each Other's Way

By Edwin Visser

Everyone supports localisation. We believe in it and are committed to it. Yet in practice, progress is far slower and more difficult than our rhetoric suggests. What is holding it back—and what needs to change?

It is encouraging to see that in a polarised world full of divisions, there remains surprising support for localisation. Across the political spectrum—both the left and the right—there is broad agreement on the value and importance of locally led development.

The idea itself is not entirely new. In the 1990s, the focus was already on participation and community-based development. Still, real momentum only emerged in the past decade, particularly following the 2016 Istanbul Summit and the Grand Bargain, which acted as a key driver.

The Grand Bargain established agreements among donors, UN agencies, NGOs, and the Red Cross, with shared goals that included greater funding flexibility and predictability, a shift toward cash-based interventions, and increased support for local organisations through capacity strengthening and larger budgets.

We are moving towards a world in which power relations are far more balanced than in previous decades—a world in which traces of colonisation are being erased, and where we learn to listen first, rather than imposing our implementation models and theories.

There is no space to question the imposition of our cultural values openly. Local organisations are becoming more active, vocal, and better equipped to articulate the needs they identify and the approaches they believe are most appropriate. And rightly so.

Yet the localisation process remains fraught with contradictions, and the gap between theory and practice remains considerable. While the development community increasingly echoes the call for locally led initiatives, partnership equality remains elusive. A closer look reveals several systemic obstacles that hinder truly locally driven development.

One major issue lies in how local NGOs are shaped by Western development paradigms. Their success often hinges on how well they align with international norms—focusing on efficiency, measurable results, and adherence to external standards. As a result, many local organisations begin to mirror their international counterparts.

While this may grant them recognition and resources, it also raises the question: Does this truly lead to locally led development? Are these organisations truly local if they must adapt to Western models to thrive? The risk is a loss of contextual and cultural richness, reinforcing the same power dynamics that localisation is meant to challenge.

A genuinely locally led model would empower organisations to define success on their terms and remain rooted in their unique working ways. For development to be sustainably and genuinely locally led, local actors must be in the driving

Cholera clinic for South Sudanese refugees in Matar

seat—designing and shaping approaches they deem most appropriate. This requires humility and a willingness to listen to international actors.

Closely related is the issue of how we measure localisation. Current metrics, such as the proportion of funding channelled through local partners—as seen in frameworks like the Grand Bargain—offer limited insight into the actual quality of local engagement.

To date, it is mostly donors and international organisations setting the priorities, with local partners at best implementing part of them—leaving entrenched power structures intact.

What matters more is the actual impact of local involvement, the level of control local actors have over processes, and the extent to which their visions and needs shape decision-making.

Qualitative indicators—around influence, participation, mandate, and decision-making power—should lead the way in measuring localisation

Further complicating matters is the blurred distinction between what is deemed 'local' and 'international.' An NGO that is locally led in practice may still be considered international due to its legal registration. Conversely, international NGOs sometimes establish 'local' branches that meet the letter—but not the spirit—of localisation.

These manoeuvres satisfy donor requirements while leaving power structures intact. Here, too, new criteria are needed to define 'locally led.' The essence of what is local should not be based on legal status, but rather on the degree of equality in relationships and the genuine willingness to let local voices take the lead.

At the same time, the few local organisations capable of meeting donor requirements often face overwhelming demands. They are rewarded with more contracts, but each comes with complex compliance obligations, leading to excessive bureaucratic pressure.

Meanwhile, smaller or emerging organisations are often left behind. A more balanced approach would involve coordinated efforts among donors and INGOs to nurture a wider ecosystem—giving newer local actors the time and support to grow on their own terms.

The challenge is compounded by the way some local NGOs operate. While many are born of genuine community needs, others emerge primarily as vehicles to access funding. In a sector involving billions, this is not surprising.

But when financial incentives dominate, questions arise about sustainability and integrity. The most impactful organisations tend to be those with deep community roots and intrinsic motivation to drive change—criteria that should carry more weight than donor compliance capacity.

Moreover, the assumption that locally led development is inherently cheaper or more efficient does not always hold. Local partners are increasingly expected to meet the same rigorous demands as international actors, often without

equivalent resources.

Administrative and capacity-building costs continue to rise, challenging the perception that localisation is a cost-saving strategy. Local organisations deserve to be treated equally, including in the funding they receive for project delivery. Efficiency should not be the main metric— ocal ownership and embeddedness must take precedence.

Another layer of complexity involves the tension between neutrality and ethnic dynamics. Local organisations, deeply embedded in their communities, may naturally lean toward helping those within their ethnic or social group. While understandable, this poses a challenge to the principle of impartiality that underpins humanitarian aid.

Expecting local actors to transcend these biases entirely is unrealistic. This dilemma requires the involvement of multiple actors—sometimes including international ones— o uphold objectivity and accountability. We must better appreciate the specific contexts in which local organisations operate.

Localisation also brings heightened exposure to corruption risks. Local actors often operate without the same institutional buffers or legal protections as international NGOs. Transparency remains limited, and efforts to address fraud can provoke disproportionate donor responses.

To move forward, the sector must explore more context-appropriate and constructive ways to tackle corruption, including rethinking punitive responses and promoting more nuanced, collaborative solutions.

Risk sharing is another area where inequalities persist. Most development work occurs in fragile contexts, often involving significant risk. However, almost all liability falls on either local organisations or the international NGOs that contract them.

When local organisations contract directly with donors, they assume the full risk—despite frequently lacking the capacity to do so. In the meantime, international NGOs are typically held accountable for the entire contract, including the local component.

Donors still exhibit far too little flexibility in adapting their accountability requirements to the capacities of local actors. Nonetheless, expecting international NGOs to bear all risks is also unrealistic. Donors who value localisation should reconsider risk-sharing policies to create a more equitable playing field.

Finally, at the heart of the localisation debate lies a fundamental truth: the origin of funding continues to shape the direction of development. 'He who pays decides' remains an unspoken rule, reinforcing an imbalance between donors and recipients.

Even as donor priorities evolve, the power to set agendas and define impact still resides with those controlling the purse strings. This tension—between accountability to funders and the vision of community-led change—m ust be confronted directly. Until we address these double standards, localisation will remain more aspiration than reality.

'He who pays decides' remains an unspoken rule, reinforcing an imbalance between donors and recipients.

In conclusion, these obstacles reveal that the transition to locally led development raises many important questions that deserve honest discussion. There is a clear mismatch between the ideals we claim to support and the policy frameworks that often prevent their realisation.

The lack of flexibility and leniency directly contradicts localisation ambitions. Moreover, many 'successes' reported are only partial evidence of real change in the power dynamics between donors, and international and local actors.

It is high time we confront these dilemmas transparently and discuss them with more openness than we have managed so far.

BIO

Edwin Visser is the Chief Programme Officer at ZOA, an NGO specialising in humanitarian aid and reconstruction across 15 countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. ZOA is supported by a large base of private donors in the Netherlands, alongside institutional funding. Before joining ZOA's Executive Board in 2019, Edwin spent 20 years working in media and emergency response in countries including Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Egypt.

From Bavel to Kenya: How Harambee Holland Passed the Baton

by Marc Broere

© Abdulwadud Bayo

After nearly 25 years, Stichting Harambee Holland took a significant step last year by handing over all of its projects to the Kenyan Hongera Foundation. The farewell in Ulvenhout was both festive and emotional. Because how do you bring your supporters along in a story about letting go, trust, and 'shifting the power'? Together with founders Roel and Marianne Meijers and special professor Sara Kinsbergen, we look back on a period of solidarity, challenges, and new ways of building connections.

The farewell gathering of Stichting Harambee Holland in the spring of 2024 was a grand celebration. In a packed community hall in Ulvenhout, more than a hundred people celebrated the moment when the foundation, established in 2001 by Roel and Marianne Meijers of Bavel, formally handed over its work to the Kenyan Hongera Foundation.

A beautiful video was shown about the foundation's achievements and the handover to its Kenyan sister organisationa— chievements that were certainly not insignificant. In almost 25

years, Harambee Holland has made significant contributions to improving the quality of education in western Kenya.

New schools were built, and existing ones were upgraded; every initiative followed a clear guiding principle: no demand, no project. Each effort also required the active involvement of local government, the school, and parents—whether through financial contributions or in-kind support.

Among those present was Jacob Omondi, for many years Roel and Marianne's trusted partner in Kenya. He now steps in as head of the Hongera Foundation, bringing with him an impressive track record as general manager of the Parklands Sports Club and, more recently, the Royal Golf Club in Nairobi. With his extensive Kenyan network, he also hopes to give new momentum to local fundraising.

Yet when the audience ~~in~~ ostly loyal donors of Harambee Holland—was asked who would stop contributing once Roel and Marianne stepped down, surprisingly many hands went up. It was a somewhat painful moment for Omondi, who nevertheless stayed composed, meeting the room with a steady smile.

A few months later, we reflect on this in a Nijmegen café with Roel and Marianne, joined by Sara Kinsbergen, special professor at Radboud University Nijmegen, whose research focuses on the role of citizens in sustainable development. Kinsbergen has studied citizen initiatives in development cooperation for many years, with Harambee Holland involved from the very start.

Apparently, Harambee Holland's message about handing over the projects to the local Hongera Foundation had not fully reached some of its supporters. 'That may well be true,' Marianne reflects. 'We were so focused on ensuring the projects in Kenya would continue smoothly that we did not involve our own donors enough in the handover process.'

Her husband, Roel, nods: 'But we did write about it extensively in our newsletter,' he adds. 'So, they could have known.' But he also sees another issue. 'We have always been a foundation mainly supported by people from our own network.

'Some donors only want to give to a Dutch organisation or to people they personally know and trust. People they can hold accountable if something goes wrong. That is different from a Kenyan who lives far away and whom you do not know personally.'

Sara Kinsbergen listens carefully and says: 'I thought it was courageous and honest that people in Ulvenhout raised their hands. There was one woman who was very outspoken and said she had started donating to Harambee Holland because of Roel and Marianne.

'For me, that reaction symbolised the broader challenges we face in development cooperation today. We often talk about shifting the power or decolonising aid, but before that can happen, something fundamental has to shift in people's mindset.

'You see more and more donors giving directly to organisations in the Global South, but the Dutch public has hardly been included in this transition. Within the development sector's bubble, a great deal of excellent work is being done to make localisation a reality.

'However, a part of Dutch society still holds a very outdated view of development cooperation. They think we still need to send Dutch people to Africa to explain how things should be done there.'

She takes a sip of her cola and continues: 'Besides, Roel and Marianne are local celebrities. In their community, they are as well known for their development work as singer Bono is internationally. They built enormous trust and were always the bridge between the projects in Kenya and their donors. When they step away, that is very difficult for many people to accept.'

> ***'We have always been a foundation mainly supported by people from our own network.'***

And then there is another challenge: it will never be the same again. 'Small-scale development cooperation is always person-to-person,' says Kinsbergen. 'It is not a machine where you can replace one screw with another.'

Marianne now realises that things should not remain the same either. 'At first, I wanted the projects to continue in the same way and with the same impact. But that would saddle Hongera with an impossible task. The board of the new foundation consisted of people we personally knew well. At a certain point, I also felt that they were doing it mainly out of loyalty to Roel and me. That should never be the case.'

Kinsbergen agrees. 'Let it go, Marianne, and do not feel obliged. The same goes for the partners in Kenya; they should not feel morally bound to continue out of gratitude. You can simply raise a glass and take pride in what you have achieved over those 25 years. It has been a beautiful expression of solidarity, and now it is time for everyone to move forward on their own path.'

Roel nods: 'Looking back, we should have discussed that loyalty issue much more clearly with Omondi. The projects can only move forward if he builds a completely new team with no ties to us. Fortunately, he now has that.'

> ***'We often talk about shifting the power or decolonising aid, but before that can happen, something fundamental has to shift in people's mindset.'***

One of the reasons Roel and Marianne decided to hand over the foundation was age (Roel is now 76 and Marianne 71), and a desire to spend more time with their grandchildren. Yet the calling remains. From the Netherlands, they continue to see themselves as world citizens, finding new ways to contribute.

They wrote a book, *'Samen de handen ineen' (Joining Hands Together),* about their experiences, including dos and don'ts~~a~~ n invaluable resource for other small organisations working in development cooperation in the Netherlands.

They also occasionally speak across the country about their work. 'We were recently invited by a service club in Zeist and came back really enthusiastic,' says Marianne. 'You notice that the simple, basic story resonates with people. And also, the fact that local people and local authorities always contributed to our projects, so it was never entirely dependent on foreign support.'

Sara Kinsbergen believes the couple can still play an integral role in Dutch society in getting citizens engaged in development cooperation. 'Development organisations need to step out of their bubble and bring back the human connection.

'Roel and Marianne have shown exactly how that can be done. We need more bridge-builders like them, who, by sharing their stories and experiences, help to build global solidarity in the Netherlands—bridge-builders to explain how the world is interconnected and that we all depend on each other.

'Right now, there are still people who think that the Dutch border defines where problems begin and end. It is about seeking connection. I always find it striking that staff of development organisations are quicker to hop on a plane to Kenya than to visit a community centre in a Dutch town,' she says.

'A bit like in the Efteling amusement park,' says Marianne. 'What I like there is that people from all walks of life stand together in long lines before a ride, and they start talking to each other. That, to me, is what development cooperation should be like. It begins with conversation. The results may not be immediate, but it can be the start of something meaningful.'

In the meantime, they have put this idea into practice by starting Café Bavel at their kitchen table every two months. Six people are invited to discuss current issues in the Netherlands in relation to the world: how involved do you feel with the world, and in what ways can you shape that involvement?

One or two 'professionals' in the field of development cooperation join, along with four or five citizens from their own network or community. An anonymised report of the discussions is then published on *Vice Versa's website*.

Sara Kinsbergen is also very enthusiastic about this. 'We really need to highlight solidarity between people. And how do you do that? By engaging in conversations together. Not the one-way conversation that development cooperation is important, but a listening conversation about what kind of society we envision together.

'The challenges we face here and elsewhere, and how we can tackle them together. It may not end world hunger overnight, but it is precisely the kind of conversation we need.'

Localising the SDGs: Why Local is the New Global

Text: Raphael Obonyo

With the 2030 deadline fast approaching, most Sustainable Development Goals are off track, while others are slipping backward. Behind the global headlines, one truth stands out: real change begins at the grassroots. To turn the SDGs from lofty promises into tangible progress, we must turn global ambition into local action. The transformation must start locally, with people and communities leading the way.

Only seventeen percent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are currently on track, while nearly half are making minimal to moderate progress. Alarmingly, progress on more than one-third have stalled or even reversed, according to a recent United Nations report.

With the 2030 deadline fast approaching, concerns are mounting over the significant challenges hindering their achievement. The report highlights the urgent need for greater involvement of local actors to accelerate progress toward the SDGs.

Adopted by world leaders in 2015, the SDGs aim to tackle global challenges—ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring no one is left behind. Crucially, the actions needed to achieve these goals on a global scale must be rooted in local implementation.

As the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, once said, localisation puts people at the centre of development. 'We want people to have a voice in how they wish to transform their communities. That is why localising the SDGs is so important,' she said

The SDGs address a wide range of concerns shared by countries at all levels of development—whether it is rising inequality, the growing frequency of natural disasters and climate change threats, or the erosion of social cohesion and increasing violence. However, the initial optimism that accompanied their adoption is now giving way to growing concern and uncertainty.

A critical prerequisite for achieving the SDGs is

localisation—dapting and translating the global goals into local development plans that reflect specific needs and contexts. This process requires aligning strategies and policies across all levels of government to ensure coordinated planning, implementation, monitoring, and review of SDG progress.

Localising the Sustainable Development Goals is essential to their achievement. The ambitious set of seventeen goals and 169 targets was developed through an unprecedented global dialogue involving UN Member States, local authorities, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders.

As the former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, stated, 'Our struggle for sustainability will be won or lost at the local level.' Indeed, SDG localisation is critical to achieving the goals and ensuring no one is left behind—especially considering that nearly two-thirds of the 169 targets depend on the contributions and support of local actors.

Greater efforts are needed to advance the localisation of the SDGs, and four key drivers play a central role in this process. The first is raising awareness and effectively disseminating information about the SDGs at the local level.

Enhancing citizens' understanding and fostering a sense of ownership is essential. Individuals must be actively involved in both the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs to ensure meaningful progress.

An example of effective localisation is the regional office of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in the Middle East and North Africa. The office mobilises and coordinates humanitarian assistance for people in need, and strongly believes that localisation is smart, effective, and essential.

It has been actively empowering local actors to make humanitarian responses more context-specific, culturally appropriate, and people-centred. More effort is needed to localise the Sustainable Development Goals and to engage communities on how these global goals can drive positive local change.

The second key driver is advocacy—to ensure that local views and perspectives are integrated into both national and global SDG strategies. The meaningful participation of local organisations and individuals in shaping these strategies is essential to ensure they reflect and respond to specific local needs, priorities, and circumstances.

As Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator, rightly noted, localising the SDGs is about more than simply 'landing' internationally agreed goals at the local level. It is about making the aspirations of the SDGs real and tangible for communities, households, and individuals—especially those at risk of being left behind.

Third, the implementation of the SDGs must go local. Beyond awareness and advocacy, concrete action is needed within communities. This includes conducting needs assessments to identify local priorities, aligning local development plans with the SDGs, and fostering cooperative governance to establish shared goals.

Equally important are strategies for mobilising local resources, building capacity, promoting community ownership and responsive leadership, encouraging development cooperation, and facilitating peer-to-peer learning.

Beyond awareness and advocacy, concrete action is needed within communities.

For example, Nomadic Assistance for Peace and Development, a non-governmental organisation that promotes sustainable peace and human development in Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia, has developed practical strategies to implement localisation effectively.

By grounding its work in the realities of local contexts, the organisation ensures that its interventions are responsive to community-driven needs and priorities.

Notably, localisation involves considering subnational contexts in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda—from setting goals and targets to determining implementation strategies and selecting indicators to measure and monitor progress.

It refers both to how local and regional governments can contribute to achieving the SDGs through bottom-up, community-driven action, and to how the SDGs can serve as a guiding framework for shaping local development policies.

Last but not least, monitoring, evaluation, and learning from diverse experiences are essential. The SDGs are tracked through a system of 231 global indicators, many of which can be localised by collecting and analysing data at the community level. Greater efforts are needed to promote the participation of local organisations and individuals in monitoring progress.

Additionally, global and national indicators should be adapted to reflect the local context. Governments must prioritise the localisation of the SDGs and place people at the heart of their implementation and monitoring. Reporting processes should engage more local voices to offer a broader and more accurate picture of their progress.

Localisation matters. While the SDGs are global their success ultimately depends on translating them into meaningful action at the local level. All of the goals include targets that directly affect communities—particularly in the delivery of services. Most importantly, achieving the SDGs requires strong local ownership.

Sustained effort is required to turn Agenda 2030 from a global vision into a local reality. Local communities and stakeholders—who best understand their unique needs, priorities, and capacities—are critical partners in implementing and realising this global accord.

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Communities should take the lead in their development

by Joris Tielens

In locally led development, communities take the reins. They decide how to allocate funds and take full responsibility for their decisions. The programme *Reversing the Flow* explores this approach by advocating for a shift in mindset: 'Everyone, including donors, must adapt.'

'In the past, when a water tank was constructed, it was often labelled as belonging to a specific *NGO*, with signs crediting *NGO* A and donor B. Now, communities take charge. When they need a water tank, they organise, draft funding proposals, seek technical guidance, pool resources, and construct the tank.'

Some community members even want to place a sign next to the water tank with their names on it, because they see it as theirs. And with that sense of ownership comes a commitment to maintain it. That is what makes it sustainable, says James Mema, a project officer at the community development organisation IMPACT in Laikipia, Kenya.

Being from the community, Mema serves as a bridge between local people, organisations, and the government. He explains that in the past, many development projects were implemented according to preset plans. But despite significant investments, many ultimately failed. The reason? The community did not own them—so they did not last.

'Now we have a chance to change this,' says Mema, who works on the *Reversing the Flow* programme. 'The biggest difference between this approach and traditional development work is that now, funding goes directly to communities. It builds their confidence. It is them who decide what needs to happen.'

Reversing the Flow is a Dutch-funded initiative that supports communities in vulnerable settings by strengthening their water security. The programme empowers communities through locally led water and climate adaptation efforts and is guided by the principles of locally led adaptation (see box).

Launched in 2022, the programme offers long-term funding—spanning ten years—and is implemented through ten local organisations, or 'hubs,' across five countries: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan.

Seventy percent of the programme's total subsidy budget—around €13.5 million in its first phase—goes directly to local communities, who decide for themselves how to use it. The remaining thirty percent is allocated to the hubs, which support and facilitate the process.

The origins of *Reversing the Flow* can be traced back to a 2018 evaluation of international water policy conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (*IOB*) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The review found that only about ten percent of the Netherlands' investments in international water cooperation reached communities—and that much of the funding was spent on issues that did not reflect local priorities. But how new is the idea of locally led development?

For decades, development cooperation has emphasised the importance of community participation in projects. 'By transferring money directly to communities, we are truly taking the next step,' says Sandra Cats, coordinator of *Reversing the Flow* at the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (*RVO*).

An anthropologist with years of experience in development cooperation, Cats explains: 'Locally led development means those who face the problems have real control over the solutions. It is not just about involving them—it is about trusting them with the funds. That also means donors have to let go of the belief that they know best how the money should be spent.'

One of the biggest challenges in the development cooperation sector is the persistent belief that local people lack capacity, she continues. 'But communities do have capacity—they often know exactly what to do. Sometimes, they just do things differently than we are used to. We need to reverse the way we think about development. That is exactly what the name *Reversing the Flow* is about.'

In southern Bangladesh, Hassan Abdullah Rafath of the social development organisation *Uttaran* works with communities living on poldered land. In traditional development cooperation, it is often the donors who determine the needs and priorities of communities without proper consultation, says Rafath.

'An international *NGO* based in the capital might design a project without truly understanding the local context,' says Rafath. 'For instance, a project might focus on cow rearing, where someone would receive a cow as part of a livelihood intervention. But that person might not know how to rear cows, might lack the necessary resources, and would actually prefer fish farming instead.'

Rafath stresses the importance of recognising local knowledge and supporting communities to organise themselves. 'They should be able to develop project proposals based on their priorities~~a~~nd present them to local governments and other stakeholders.'

What makes *Reversing the Flow* unique, Rafath explains, is the freedom it gives communities to identify their priorities and decide how to spend the funds~~a~~s long as it is linked to climate change adaptation.

In one community, for instance, waterlogging caused the cemetery to flood, and the dead would be washed away. For them, the urgent priority was to establish a cemetery on higher ground. The programme allowed them to respond to that specific need.

Directly financing communities demands trust and a willingness to let go, says Sandra Cats. 'I sometimes compare it to raising children. You can spend all your time putting down rubber tiles to prevent them from falling, or you can say: let them learn to fall properly.' She pauses, then adds, 'And learning to fall~~t~~hat is something we, as donors, need to do first. We are the ones who must change. We have to learn to let go.'

This shift in approach also applied to the programme's funders at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to *RVO* as coordinators. At first, a programme like *Reversing the Flow,* which is based on direct funding to communities, was considered risky, says Cats. 'Unlike traditional programmes, *Reversing the Flow* did not define preset targets or standard indicators.

'That is because it is the local people who decide what needs to be done. And the ministry gave us the space to do that,' she states. The same goes for the programme's duration. 'Building trust and relationships takes time—so does restoring landscapes. That is why the programme was designed to run for ten years.'

According to Karen Stehouwer, a colleague of Cats at *RVO,* the entire programme is built on trust in the expertise of local partners. 'We did not choose them randomly. We specifically looked for organisations that were willing to embrace this new way of working~~p~~artners who dared to let go.'

The ten hubs implementing the programme each have a strong, long-term track record—partly thanks to decades of Dutch investment in development cooperation. These partners are deeply rooted in their local contexts; they understand community dynamics, power relations, and how to co-create genuinely community-led solutions.

'How they go about that is not something we should interfere with,' says Cats. 'At the same time, we do engage in open, reflective conversations with them—on how they apply the locally led approach, and how they navigate and address structural inequalities, even within the communities themselves.'

This approach also demands a willingness to unlearn certain culturally ingrained habits, Cats adds. 'We are always in a hurry and expect quick results. So when it took months just to fill out a form, I found that challenging. But maybe something important was happening during that time—something I could not see. That, too, is part of letting go.'

'That also means donors have to let go of the belief that they know best how the money should be spent.'

Accountability for expenditures in the *Reversing the Flow* programme is handled differently from traditional development programmes. 'The hubs report on their spending to *RVO,*' explains Karen Stehouwer.

'But for the portion of funds that is re-granted to the community, we do not require formal audits or standard financial reports. Instead, community members are accountable to themselves.'

How that accountability is practised is left up to the community. 'It could be through cash books, before-and-after photos of the project, community meetings—whatever fits their culture and way of doing things,' says Stehouwer.

James Mema affirms this. 'We do not audit the community. They hold themselves accountable. Transparency is essential. Everyone knows how much money is involved and what it is meant for. For example, if they agree to install three kilometres of water pipeline in three months, that plan is shared with everyone—often through WhatsApp.'

Communities also gain valuable insights into project costs and implementation processes by observing and comparing with others. 'If a pipeline is not completed within three months, people will start asking questions'— *What happened? Where is it?'* says Mema. 'That is our form of accountability. It is peer-driven and rooted in transparency.'

Still, ensuring that everyone has an equal voice is a critical challenge. 'Someone who speaks well does not always have the best ideas,' he notes. 'And if only the confident or outspoken dominate the discussion, others might be excluded. That is not what we want. The goal is to place control in the hands of the whole community~~n~~ot just a few individuals.'

To address this, Mema and his colleagues make a deliberate effort to involve diverse groups. 'We organise separate meetings for women, youth, and so on. We also rely on trusted community resource persons~~p~~eople who live in the village~~t~~o check in with those who might not speak up in public forums. And we validate what was discussed in the larger meetings through smaller group discussions.'

The outcome of the programme, he says, is communities that are empowered and equipped to take charge of their development in the future. They are also building stronger networks with one another and with local government structures.'

He points to an example in Laikipia, where three neighbouring communities each started with small-scale projects but wanted to tackle a bigger issue the following year. All three communities depend on the same river catchment and agreed to build a sand dam together.

'The goal is to place control in the hands of the whole community~~n~~ot just a few individuals.'

Localisation or locally led development

What is the difference between localisation and locally led development? Localisation is often used as a general term when referring to making funds locally available. But it does not say much about who has ownership. So, when an International *NGO* moves its headquarters from the EU to Nairobi, that may be referred to as localisation.

Karen Stehouwer: 'For us, locally led development is about devolving decision-making power, putting it at the lowest appropriate level. It starts with the question: Whose problem is this? Who is experiencing it? And those are the people who should decide how to address it.'

The dam slows the river's flow, allowing water to seep into the ground. Over time, this in groundwater recharge, revitalises vegetation, improves grazing conditions for livestock, and stores water that can be used during dry spells.

This brings up a crucial question: What is the right level for decision-making? Not all challenges can or should be tackled by a single community. 'That is exactly the kind of question we have to think about when applying a locally-led approach,' says Cats.

'Locally-led development does not always mean decisions happen at the individual community level, like in traditional community-based models. It depends on the nature of the problem and whether the community can address it.'

Some issues require the involvement of local government. In other cases, challenges cross community boundaries and demand collaboration between different groups or coordination with formal institutions.

This is where the hubs play a critical role: they help communities connect with government bodies or other stakeholders responsible for larger-scale interventions. But central is the principle that the ones who experience a problem are the ones holding the decision-making power over the solution.

There is still resistance to the locally led development approach, acknowledges James Mema. 'Some *NGOs* worry that if communities become capable of writing their proposals and managing funds, they will no longer be needed,' he says. This concern is rooted in a deeper belief that still lingers in parts of the development sector: local communities cannot lead and implement their projects.

To counter this perception, the programme collects and shares real-life stories and videos that showcase how the approach works in practice. Knowledge partner MetaMeta curates and distributes these through the platform www.thewaterchannel.tv, making the evidence publicly accessible.

At first, Mema says, even communities themselves were hesitant. 'This way of working demands more responsibility. It is a shift in mindset and practice, and it takes time.' But now, in the third year of implementation, he sees tangible change. 'The self-esteem of communities is growing. They draft their proposals, understand how to seek funding, and even train other communities to do the same.'

Momentum is building. 'More and more *NGOs* are starting to believe that this might be the way forward,' says Mema. 'It is becoming a movement.'

When you are forced to let go

The *Reversing the Flow* programme had just started in Sudan when violent conflict erupted between the Rapid Support Forces (*RSF*) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (*SAF*). More than nine million people were forced to flee, and commodity prices surged.

In times like these, you are forced to let go, be flexible, and adapt your approach, which shows the work of the Reversing the Flow hub, *SOS* Sahel Sudan. The internet was continuously interrupted, so staff switched to face-to-face meetings and had locals deliver old-fashioned letters to the community. As fuel prices soared and privately owned cars became the target of illegal confiscation, *SOS* Sahel Sudan turned to public transportation and rented local vehicles to continue their work.

Moreover, the conflict has resulted in government-imposed restrictions on organisational activities and meetings in the Bara landscape. To counter this, *SOS* Sahel Sudan appointed a local steering committee composed of local leaders, government officials and technical experts. They managed to convince the government to lift the restrictions on meetings, allowing the programme to continue in the midst of the ongoing conflict.

The photos accompanying this story are from Reversing the Flow programs in Bangladesh and Kenya.

No regrets, Just Growth

By Elizabeth Kameo

In Dosso, Tillabéri, and Niamey—three regions within Niger's Niger River Valley—a wave of change is transforming communities. These communities are now leading the decision-making process for funding activities aimed at local development. This shift has sparked a renewed sense of ownership over projects, fostering stronger social cohesion, revitalised communal bonds, and overall improvement in community well-being.

The contrast between the fenced-off garden and the non-farmed land on the other side is striking. One green and lush, with vegetables and fruit trees, the other dry and sunburnt, with scattered trees reminiscent of a dryland.

Inside the fence, the bustle, hustle and chatter of a group of about fifty women, some seated on the ground sorting out leafy vegetables, while others go back and forth between their gardens and the water holes, makes for a busy scene. Add to that the goings and comings of different women.

Two ten-cubic-meter tanks stand prominently, and the steady sound of water flowing into one of the four reservoirs signals a significant change—no longer do the women need to walk miles in search of water.

Showing off freshly picked Cassia Tora leaves, a happy Amina Hamadou says that is what is on the dinner menu for her family tonight.

'This market garden has changed our lives,' she says. 'Before, we used to cut down Lala Palm trees to weave mats for sale at the market. We were destroying the environment just to make a living.'

Hamadou is one of the original sixty women from the Gomni Women's Group in Belandé Djerma village, Falmey Municipality, in Niger's Dosso region.

They received training from ONG Aménagement des Terroirs et Productions Forestières (ATPF), an NGO focused on land management and forest production, to establish the market garden.

In turn, they passed on their knowledge to other women, and today the garden is shared by 145 women—5 more than the original target of one hundred. Each woman tends ten plots of land, each measuring three by one meter, where she can grow crops of her choice.

'Today we have vegetables and fruit for our meals. We are always in the garden, which keeps us busy and occupied all day long,' says Hamadou. 'What we do not eat, we sell at the market, and the profits help us provide for our families,' she explains.

'Before, having a garden was impossible—we could not sustain it during the hot season because there was no water. But all that has changed now.'

'This was entirely the women's initiative,' explains Boureima Ide Gourouza, a supervisor at ATPF. 'After a series of meetings with them, they requested the establishment of a market garden so they could grow food

year-round.'

He continues, 'First, the women identified a piece of land, which was given to them by the village chief. Then they chose the crops they wanted to grow—tomatoes, carrots, cabbage, and potatoes. After that, they received training and began setting up the market garden.'

Following the training, the women successfully established market gardens for vegetable production. This improved their families' nutrition and also boosted household incomes. They were trained in cultivation techniques, community organisation, and management.

In addition, they received seed supplies, water infrastructure was installed, and they were supported in developing and maintaining the garden sites.

He continues, 'First, the women identified a piece of land, which was given to them by the village chief. Then they chose the crops they wanted to grow—tomatoes, carrots, cabbage, and potatoes. After that, they received training and began setting up the market garden.'

'We were destroying the environment to make a living.'

ATPF's core mission is to combat poverty and environmental degradation in pursuit of sustainable development. Its approach is firmly rooted in participation, placing beneficiary communities at the centre as full partners and stakeholders in identifying, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating all development initiatives.

The NGO works closely with a range of partners, including government technical services, municipalities, and local communities.

According to Hadi Ismaeila, secretary of the Gomni Women's Group, 'This market garden makes sense; it was our decision, and now we are reaping the benefits. It is the only one in the village. We feel safe working here because of the fence, and our crops are protected from damage by both wild and domestic animals.'

The Belandé Women's Resilience Support Project is one of 31 grant-funded initiatives approved in 2024 under the *Projet Sans Regret* (No Regrets Projects).

'*Projet sans Regret* is part of the 2022 – 2052 Strategic Planning Programme on the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources of the Niger River Valley in Niger.

The programme's main aim is to create a unified approach to accessing and utilising natural resources, allowing communities to benefit from them while at the same time ensuring their sustainable conservation,' says Yacoub Seybou, coordinator of the Comité Technique d'Appui au Programme (CTAP)

While the strategic objective of the programme is the sustainable management of natural resources, Seybou emphasises that this goal can only be achieved by empowering the communities living in and around the Niger River Valley to be the primary decision-makers.

Hassane Cissé Technical

Assistant at CTAP, adds that components of the strategic planning programme—such as Projet Sans Regret—demonstrate the strategy's potential to deliver concrete and lasting benefits to communities through funding of activities that communities consider significant for local development.

'There are numerous opportunities, but our primary commitment is to drive development with communities at the forefront,' says Cissé He explains that this is why funding is directed straight to communities, allowing them to prioritise the activities they believe will most benefit development in their municipalities.

'This means the funds do not pass through Niger's central government,' he continues. 'Instead, they are sent directly from the Netherlands to the communities—either through a municipal account or through a local NGO that is eligible to receive a micro-grant on behalf of the community.'

'Communities learn by doing and by working, so even if we are no longer present, they have the skills and motivation to continue managing their land.'

To ensure greater impact and avoid dispersing efforts, the Strategic Programme will be implemented in 48 communities across three of Niger's eight regions. However, the first phase—*Projet Sans Regret*— as not yet been rolled out in all of them.

These targeted communities share natural resources and face inter-municipal challenges within the Niger River Valley. Projects that promote the sustainable management of land, water, and other natural resources are eligible for micro-grants of up to 25,000 Euros.

'Only activities outlined in the planning document are eligible for funding under *Projet Sans Regret*,' explains Cissé. 'They must benefit the entire community, consider the interests of diverse groups, cause no harm to nature, people, or biodiversity, and be sensitive to potential conflicts.'

'In April, we evaluated the programme to help us draw lessons from this approach and learn from the experience,' says Seybou. 'While it is too early to speak of success, the fact that we are working toward a shared vision and witnessing real transformations within communities is a step in the right direction.'

Hadizatou Kouboura Issa, Coordinator of *Femme-Jeunesse-Environnement-Développement* (FJED), adds that despite the relatively short time the project has been in operation, visible changes are already taking place.

'Today, we have carried out assisted natural regeneration on three hundred hectaresf— ar beyond the fifty hectares we initially planneda— llowing communities greater access to fields for cultivation. We established five sites instead of just one and are active in five villages through the Cash for Work programme,' she explains.

FJED's primary goal is to improve the management of degraded landscapes while simultaneously providing communities with economic opportunities as they carry out assisted natural regeneration on their lands. The long-term aim is to boost agricultural production. The regenerated land is now used to grow millet, sorghum, beans, and corn year-round.

The preliminary stages involved selecting the participating communities, identifying supervisors, and establishing village committees to oversee the activities. Other key steps included maintaining and monitoring plots, holding inter-communal meetings, and forming a five-member management committee—comprising two women, one young man, and two men.

'The activity has been praised by both the Nigerian government and the local community. The *Prefect of Falmey* even awarded us a certificate of recognition for our work,' says Issa Made.

'We began in mid-February 2025, and today, we have 350 beneficiaries, including men, women, and youth.'

She credits this success to the direct funding from the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) to locally led development organisations.

'As communities regenerate the land, they also earn an incomet— hat is the essence of the Cash for Work programme. Communities learn by doing and by working, so even if we are no longer present, they have the skills and motivation to continue managing their land,' explains Issa Made.

She continues, 'This activity has been life-changing. Niger is currently facing a difficult period following the coup d'ɛ at. But in the communities where Cash for Work is active, people can now afford to feed their

families. Women have established goat-rearing farms and small businesses. In the five villages, community markets that had disappeared have reopened, and people have regained their self-confidence—all thanks to *Projet Sans Regret.'*

This goes beyond tackling issues like vegetation loss, land degradation, and declining water quality and availability. It is also about creating short-term employment opportunities for community members—especially young people—at the outset. The goal is to discourage migration to big cities or even attempts to immigrate to Europe. So that in the long term, they have the means to build on this opportunity and develop relevant, effective, and sustainable solutions –
Yacouba Seybou

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

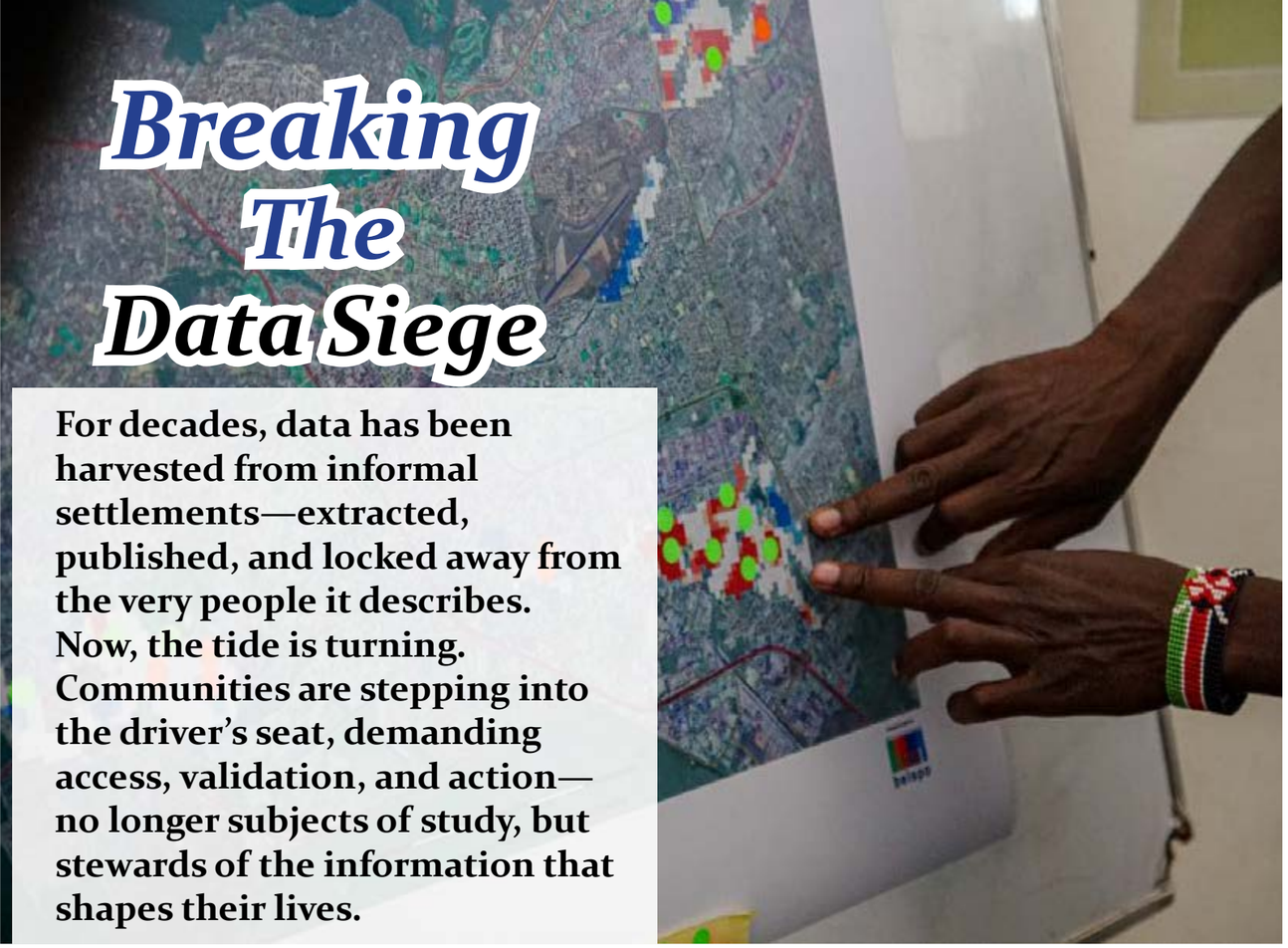
The Programme de Planification Stratégique sur la Gestion Durable des Ressources Naturelles de la Vallée du Niger au Niger 2022 – 2052 (Strategic Planning Programme on the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources of the Niger River Valley in Niger 20222 052) covers the Niger River Valley within Niger, specifically the regions of Tillabéri, Dosso, and Niamey.

Based on zones facing insecurity and exacerbated by a high population growth within the Niger Valley, the areas are facing significant degradation of natural resources (water, land, and related resources).

The programme seeks to lay the foundations for sustainable management of the natural resources of the Niger Valley in Niger, by ensuring that natural resource management is guided by local expertise making it more inclusive and sustainable.

It also allows for communities within the Niger Valley River Region to reflect on what they want to do within their communities to create change; through projects that receive micro-funding one such being *Projet Sans Regret* (The No Regrets Project).

Financed by the Dutch government, the locally driven approach is supported by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, RVO, and implemented by the *Comité Technique d'Appui au Programme*, CTAP (Technical Committee for the Support of the Programme).



Breaking The Data Siege

For decades, data has been harvested from informal settlements—extracted, published, and locked away from the very people it describes. Now, the tide is turning. Communities are stepping into the driver's seat, demanding access, validation, and action—no longer subjects of study, but stewards of the information that shapes their lives.

by Nicera Kimani

Data is an important component in development and many other aspects of today's lives. It drives decision-making processes that, in turn, influence how resources are allocated. From policymakers to field implementers, everyone relies on data to inform their actions.

Consequently, there has been a growing demand for studies~~b~~— oth commissioned and unsolicited—on governance, sustainable development, conflict resolution and transformation, socio-economic progress, and resilience over the past few decades.

Academics and professionals from the corporate sector have explored various regions, armed with hypotheses they aim to test. For instance, one common hypothesis suggests that increasing taxes on tobacco products would lead to reduced consumption among users.

Others seek to examine real-time, real-world correlations, such as the relationship between rising crime rates and high levels of youth unemployment. Informal settlements have long been easy targets for data collection. With residents often facing hard times, it becomes easier to conduct surveys among them.

These communities are frequently seen as more approachable and readily available due to perceived social disadvantages~~l~~— ower levels of literacy, limited legal awareness, and less exposure. For years, scholars and researchers have entered these settlements, conducted their studies, and left—often without validating their findings with the people they studied.

Ironically, those considered suitable for extracting information are suddenly deemed unqualified to verify it. The collected data is later presented and published—shared in boardrooms and reports—while the communities that provided the information remain unaware of how it was used.

Moreover, data is often gathered by people unfamiliar with the local context, sometimes from entirely different regions. This reinforces a troubling assumption: that these communities are good enough to provide data, but not worthy of meaningful or constructive engagement.

Recommendations and suggestions often look impressive on paper but are rarely implemented, partly because duty bearers are not made aware of the findings in the first place. As a result, decisions are made arbitrarily, and development agendas are pursued blindly~~l~~— ike shooting arrows in the dark, hoping to hit the target.

At the same time, informal settlements tend to attract numerous interventions aimed at addressing social challenges or emerging issues such as climate change. Development partners often rely on the data collected to design programmes and projects intended for these communities.

However, because the data may be disconnected from the lived realities on the ground, resources are often misdirected toward issues that are not truly relevant to communities living in survival mode. This leads to inadequate and ineffective responses to their actual needs.

Beyond validation, these communities are often not granted access to the final reports. As a result, while they participate in the research process, they remain unaware of the outcomes. This disconnect undermines their confidence in referencing facts and figures that influence decisions around infrastructure development and public service delivery.

Ultimately, it strips them of the power to engage in civic duties, like social accountability, meaningfully. In some cases, even publicly funded research data is not made available to the general public. This is particularly troubling given that data-driven interventions have been shown to deliver lasting, positive impacts.

Yet, policies that shape development agendas are often crafted without incorporating relevant research findings. This weakens implementation efforts at the grassroots level, creating fertile ground for systemic issues—such as police brutality~~t~~— o persist and flourish.

> ***In some cases, even publicly funded research data is not made available to the general public.***

'I have been part of many studies as a respondent,' Aisha Kombo tells me during our interview. 'One-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, filling out questionnaires~~I~~— have participated in so many.

'However, the researchers rarely come back with the findings. Sometimes, I am invited to a launch event where the results are being presented, and I wonder why we are not consulted to validate the findings before they are published.'

Mzee Oloo, a village elder, echoes Aisha's frustration. 'They collect information from us, but it always feels like it is meant for someone else. Meanwhile, we continue to face the same challenges—recurring floods, long droughts, and poor sanitation. Nothing seems to change.'

With a pensive look, he adds, 'It feels like we are trapped in a loop~~t~~— he knowledge that is supposed to be our key is kept out of reach. Knowledge is under siege,' he chuckles, 'colonised and reserved for a select audience. Maybe that is why we have seen so little development in our slums.'

He pauses, then reflects. 'There was a time I walked with some researchers as their guide. I ended up being a translator, not just for language but for context. There was a clear disconnect between them and the people they were studying.

'I found myself explaining local realities, bridging cultural gaps, and giving background—essentially becoming a consultant. They were navigating foreign concepts without understanding the ground they were standing on,' he states.

It is against this backdrop that I was inspired to establish a community-based organisation dedicated to making data accessible to the community. *Community Mappers* not only conducts research in informal settlements but also translates the findings into accessible, relatable language for local actors.

This data is then used to influence policy formulation, review, implementation, and oversight. By equipping communities with information, *Community Mappers* transforms residents from passive subjects of development into active, empowered participants— fostering local ownership and accountability.

The organisation has conducted several studies with direct involvement from the communities being studied. For instance, *Onekana* explored the impacts of climate change and the resulting social disparities. The *Trash Study* (2022) undertook a census on waste, examining patterns of trash distribution, composition, and nature.

Another study assessed the impact of *COVID-19* on young women living in informal settlements, providing critical insights into how crises disproportionately affect vulnerable groups. Data is no longer reserved for a select few or confined to academic journals and inaccessible reports.

Instead, it is now used interactively to drive meaningful, transformative development. Unlike in the past, the data is localised and made available at the source. Activists are equipped with accurate and relevant data to support their advocacy and influence real change.

As a result, interventions are more timely, better targeted, and more effectively aligned with community needs. For instance, during the *COVID-19* pandemic, local data was used to identify priority areas for setting up handwashing stations and distributing sanitisers and face masks. These informed actions helped curb the spread of the virus by responding directly to the needs on the ground.

Data is no longer reserved for a select few or confined to academic journals and inaccessible reports.

Data decolonisation also requires simplifying data and making it accessible to the public. Too often, data is locked away in academic journals, written in complex language and inaccessible to the very communities it concerns. To promote access and ownership, local efforts must be recognised and integrated into the entire research process.

For example, *Community Mappers* involves community members from the very beginning~~i~~— dentifying issues, designing the study, collecting data, and structuring the research. Once data is gathered, it is synthesised and validated by the community before being published and shared with relevant stakeholders.

This process ensures the data remains 'live'~~a~~— ctive, relevant and rooted in the realities of the people it represents. Organisations embedded within communities are often best positioned to uphold this model, ensuring that data ownership stays local and that findings are used to guide meaningful development.

Data decolonisation is not merely about storing or processing data within national borders, as often defined by legal or regulatory frameworks that restrict cross-border data flows. In practice, it goes much deeper. It is about removing the barriers that prevent access to data for those who live its reality every day.

For *Community Mappers,* data decolonisation means ownership. It is about making data 'live'~~n~~— ot static or archived, but active, accessible, and applied in designing interventions and informing real-world decisions.

'Decolonisation is also about localisation,' says Val, a passionate development practitioner. 'It means making data digestible and usable by the very communities from which it is sourced. It also means involving them in validating the findings and ensuring they are informed. That way, they can confidently cite this information in public forums, hold leaders accountable, and make informed choices when electing their representatives.'

Unlike the long-standing norm where scholars collect data, publish their findings, and rarely return to validate or share results with the communities involved, there is now a growing recognition of the need to make data accessible to those communities.

While we have not yet fully arrived at this ideal, local initiatives like *Community Mappers* offer hope. They signal meaningful progress toward more inclusive, transparent, and community-centred approaches to data use.

For more information, take a look at www.communitymappers.com

‘Localisation can only succeed if there is also funding for it.’

by Sarah Haaij

Nothing is more controversial in development cooperation than sexual and reproductive health and rights. And now, at a time when this agenda is under mounting global pressure, an *IOB* evaluation offers a fresh perspective on a critical question: What does it truly mean to take local ownership seriously? Two of the evaluators share their insights.

The world of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (*SRHR*) has been turned upside down. What once felt like an unstoppable wave of progress—toward universal sexual self-determination and health for every man, woman, and non-binary person~~n~~ o longer seems inevitable.

A conservative counterforce is rising. Coalitions of governments, religious organisations, and interest groups are already exerting pressure on hard-won freedoms. As a result, rights once considered inalienable are now being rolled back, both far away and close to home.

In Italy, Prime Minister Meloni has championed the ‘traditional family’ since taking office. Last summer, she had non-biological lesbian mothers removed from their children’s birth certificates. Meanwhile, the Hungarian parliament passed a law at the beginning of this year banning the annual Pride March in Budapest. A new report by UN Women (March 2025) confirms that women’s and girls’ rights are under attack across the globe.

Sexual education at a primary school in Uganda @ Rutgers

While there has been some progress in areas such as education, access to family planning, and efforts to combat violence against women, the overall picture remains grim. Worldwide, a woman or girl is still murdered every ten minutes by a partner or family member. Since 2022, reported cases of sexual violence have risen by fifty percent.

These are the very themes for which the Netherlands has long been known as a progressive guiding country—one of the few donor nations to consistently support projects on so-called ‘sensitive’ issues such as abortion, *LGBTIQ+* rights, girls’ health and freedom of choice, and protection for sex workers. But even here, the tide seems to be turning.

Former Dutch minister Klever has announced that going forward, all Dutch development cooperation must directly serve national interests. At the same time that Trump has dismantled *USAID*~~t~~— he world’s largest aid programme~~t~~— he Dutch cabinet is slashing 2.4 billion Euros from its aid budget. The Netherlands will withdraw support for all projects focused on women’s rights, gender equality, vocational and higher education, sports, and culture.

Together with the announced cuts, the minister also says he wants to focus on localisation. In her policy letter on the future of cooperation with civil society organisations, she writes: ‘Local ownership in development aid yields better results. Greater ownership of civil society organisations in developing countries ensures effective and permanent embedding of development programmes in the local context.’

Klever’s commitment to localisation was, as she noted during a parliamentary debate, partly driven by a study from the International Research and Policy Evaluation Directorate (*IOB*)~~t~~— he independent evaluation arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The report, titled *Consistent Efforts, Persisting Challenges* (2023), examined Dutch *SRHR* policy between 2012 and 2022.

In this comprehensive report, the *IOB* concludes that, despite political headwinds, the Netherlands made meaningful contributions to improving *SRHR* and reducing the spread of *HIV/AIDS* in the Global South between 2012 and 2022. At the same time, the report offers several strong recommendations for strengthening *SRHR* policy—greater attention to localisation was among them.

Vice Versa speaks with two of the report’s evaluators, Echica van Kelle and Caspar Lobbrecht. At a time when *SRHR* policy is undergoing significant change, it is especially valuable to turn to rigorous research. What localisation lessons from their *SRHR* evaluation can help shape the future?

If the Netherlands ends its support for an SRHR project, there is a high chance the project will come to a complete halt, the IOB found.

The evaluation praises the Netherlands for its leading role in putting sexual rights on the global agenda and working to improve them. During their research, the evaluators observed how the Netherlands not only championed *SRHR* themes but, in some cases, stood alone in supporting them on a project basis.

Policy researcher Caspar Lobbrecht notes: ‘In international forums, we saw that while other donors mostly focused on general health issues, Dutch diplomats spoke out more assertively on ‘sensitive’ topics—such as sex education.’

The highlight of this profiling, health scientist Echica van Kelle analyses, was the creation of *SheDecides,* the initiative of then Minister Lilianne Ploumen. *SheDecides* helped mitigate the damage caused by the funding gap left by Trump’s reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule, which cut U.S. support for any organisations involved in abortion care. Still, the consequences were severe: countless women’s clinics were forced to close, and access to contraceptives and information was lost.

The crisis laid bare the vulnerability created by aid dependency — *a reality that*, for the *IOB* evaluators, underscored the urgency of localisation. As they define it: ‘Moving resources and decision-making power from here to the countries where development cooperation programmes are implemented.’

In the twelve years that Lobbrecht has been working at *IOB,* localisation is a theme that he has heard a lot about, ‘both at Foreign Affairs and in the international community,’ but which in practice lags considerably behind.

Van Kelle: ‘In our research into the strategic *SRHR* partnerships, we looked at this

closely—analysing previous evaluations for each partnership and conducting country visits to Bangladesh and Uganda. This allowed us to identify several challenges, including high indirect costs (not directly tied to the product or project), questions around ownership, and a complex, layered structure with many organisational levels between donor and implementer.'

These observations led the duo to explore localisation more deeply, resulting in several key recommendations. One of the first recommendations is to ensure that the organisations in the focus countries receive more core funding instead of project-based support.

Lobbrecht: 'Within subsidy frameworks, you are often dealing with relatively short-term projects implemented simultaneously across several countries through multiple layers of subcontractors (implementing organisations). But these projects often reflect priorities set in The Hague.' With a policy focused on specific countries and thematic areas, it is the donor—not the country where the project takes place—that ultimately sets the agenda.

In this system, local partner organisations are subject to the project cycles of donor countries. Projects typically span four to five years, but as Lobbrecht points out, 'In the first year, we are just getting started, and in the final year, we begin scaling down—meaning the window for effective implementation is even shorter.'

This creates several challenges, such as local staff leaving after just one contract year and taking their skills and experience elsewhere. It also affects the sustainability of achieved results, which are often undermined when donor priorities shift, for example, when Mali replaces Ethiopia as a focus country, or when the policy emphasis moves abruptly from lobbying to implementation.

The evaluators highlight core funding as a potential solution. Lobbrecht: 'Instead of relying on complicated project proposals and financing structures, you could simply say: 'We trust this organisation. It has a strong track record and we are going to support it for the next ten years.''

This would allow organisations to retain staff for longer and implement programmes they have designed themselves. 'They would not have to seek support from multiple donors for different components of a single project.' The study found that some local organisations received funding through as many as seven different Dutch-funded programmes, each with its own communication and reporting requirements.

Local ownership in development aid yields better results.

Core funding does not necessarily have to be managed from The Hague, the researchers argue—embassies could also take on this role. Van Kelle: 'The advantage is that you are closer to the programmes and can avoid unnecessary organisational layers.

Currently, there are sometimes three tiers between the funding and actual implementation—national, regional, and then local office, for example.' Each of these layers brings additional costs: staff, office space, overhead, and coordination, all at different levels.

'Our study also revealed that it was difficult for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to act as an engaged partner within these partnerships. This is partly due to the heavy workload of policy officers, but also because of the layered structure of the partnerships themselves. It could be an option to delegate this role to embassies or professional funds—organisations based in partner countries that oversee financing to local organisations.'

Gains in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are under threat @Ben Fackler

In a recent parliamentary debate, MP Don Ceder (CU) argues that if the Minister wants to work on localisation, she must ensure that the ministry is equipped for it. Ceder: '(...)How will the ministry maintain direct contact with all those small local organisations—I think there are thousands?'

Lobbrecht: 'Ceder makes a fair point. You can delegate responsibilities to an embassy, but without intermediary partnerships, you end up dealing directly with numerous national and local organisations. Managing all of them individually is a significant undertaking. Balancing that with the target of limiting civil service staffing to 22 percent is, of course, a major challenge.'

If the future of development cooperation is to embrace more localisation, the minister must adopt greater flexibility, the *IOB* researchers argue. This includes allowing partner organisations to make more strategic decisions. While collaboration with international organisations tends to be more balanced, local social partners are still largely treated as implementers. 'We saw very little freedom of choice—just a long list of tasks to be executed.'

Van Kelle: 'And the problem with that lack of flexibility is that projects do not always meet needs.' The evaluators joined small-scale health organisations that received money from various donors to provide information or workshops, but had almost no budget for providing actual services, such as contraceptives.

'And if you ask them what they would prefer—between information and service delivery—they would often say they would like to do more service.' A situation in which people receive information about contraceptives but cannot access the pill or a condom ultimately undermines the goals of the *SRHR* agenda.

If the Netherlands ends its support for an *SRHR* project, there is a high chance the project will come to a complete halt, the *IOB* found. 'During the period we studied, the Netherlands was truly one of the largest donors in the field of *SRHR.* If that funding disappears, there are relatively few actors who can step in to continue the *programs*—any will come to a standstill.'

In Bangladesh, for example, the evaluators discovered how, not long after Dutch support ended, the teaching materials for a school-based sex education *program* had been watered down in dozens of places.

The key takeaway? Always follow up on a project. 'And keep an eye,' Van Kelle adds, 'on the poorest of the poor.' Programmes must be designed to include those from lower socio-economic backgrounds because it is precisely in these groups that health outcomes are often the worst.

Lobbrecht points out: 'The policy placed a strong emphasis on specific target groups, such as *LGBTQI+* individuals and sex workers, but the poorest of the poor were often left behind within the *SRHR* policy.'

Fewer partnerships, less lobbying, and more localisation—these were some of the key shifts in former Minister Klever's policy intentions. In defending her course, she regularly referred to the *IOB* report. But will her successor also take the evaluators' recommendations into account in the new subsidy frameworks?

'We cannot yet say anything meaningful about how the localisation agenda will take shape,' Lobbrecht notes. 'Policy development simply is not far enough along.' What is clear, however, is that localisation will only work if it is properly financed.

'The two must go hand in hand. If that money is spent in a more localised way, you can actually create added value.' And this, the evaluators stress, is the essence of their message. 'You cannot separate the recommendations,' Van Kelle says. Her colleague agrees: 'Picking one or two will not work—it is the whole package.'

Seven Ingredients for Localisation

Text by Marc Broere

Donors often claim to support localisation, yet they overlook local realities. Cristi Nozawa, Director of the Samdhana Institute, offers a sharp reminder: without solidarity, activism, and justice, localisation risks becoming an empty slogan. In what she calls seven key ingredients; she sketches out what genuine change could look like.

When we speak with Nozawa via Teams, her backdrop is the garden of her farm in the Philippine countryside, about two hours from Manila. The setting is lush and serene—a fitting environment for someone who has devoted her life to protecting both nature and communities.

Nozawa began her journey in the 1980s as a young activist opposing dams and logging, later becoming an international voice for just and sustainable environmental management. Today, she leads the Samdhana Institute, which supports Indigenous Peoples and local communities across Southeast Asia in securing land rights, adapting to climate change, and preserving cultural heritage.

Her message to donors and Western NGOs is unambiguous: too often, the nuances of local contexts are ignored; communities are treated as if they are interchangeable; and Northern civil society organisations frequently claim to speak on behalf of communities in the South.

For this interview, Nozawa outlined seven ingredients and preconditions she sees as essential for anyone serious about localisation. Together, we walk through them one by one.

1. Solidarity

'Localisation requires genuine solidarity between grassroots organisations, international civil society, and donors. It does not mean, in my view, that all development cooperation funds should automatically flow to the Global South. While most resources are indeed needed here, the problems we face cannot be solved only at the local level.

'Many of our challenges have global causes. Without solidarity, the burden of finding solutions falls unfairly on local organisations—even though the North is largely responsible for issues like climate change.

'That is why we must stand together with movements in the North that address the root causes of these problems within their own countries. Donors must not divide us by directing funds solely to Southern organisations while restricting Northern civil society groups from lobbying their own governments and corporations.

'We also need organisations such as Both ENDS, ActionAid, and Friends of the Earth. They play a crucial role in holding the Dutch government accountable and pushing for systemic change.

'If the Netherlands chooses to support only local organisations, it shirks its global responsibility. It shifts the entire burden onto us and ignores its co-responsibility for a system that creates many of these problems in the first place.'

2. Activism and Social Movements

'Localisation also requires strong support for environmental and human rights defenders—organisations and individuals risking their lives on the frontlines of capitalist society, a system intrinsically tied to a global political economy driven by profit and led by elites.

'This support is often missing because we are trapped in project cycles. Civil society organisations fall into the pitfall of adapting too much to this model: we draft five-year project plans, secure funding, and assume that by the end of the cycle, problems will be solved. In reality, much of our energy is spent on reporting to donors.

'Yes, projects can deliver results, but they are usually short-term. For genuine, long-term transformation, we need social movements~~m~~ ovements that step outside the project framework and address the deeper, structural issues. Donor funding can address some problems in the short term, but deeper challenges require movements grounded in local support and collective action.

'At Samdhana, we have always tried to look beyond project frameworks. We invested time in local fundraising and alternative forms of support to reduce dependency on donors. If you want to change the system, you must change perspectives~~a~~ nd that requires stepping outside the cycle of projects.

'One urgent issue is the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines, who continue to face systemic discrimination. This is not a problem that fits within the confines of a project; it demands long-term activism and patient work to shift mindsets.

'Unfortunately, donor appetite for funding activism and movements remains very limited. The best example was the Dutch government's *Dialogue and Dissent* programme, the predecessor of *Power of Voices*.

'That programme genuinely supported critical voices and dissent. Today, as populist governments dominate discourse with superficial narratives, the need to fund and amplify critical voices is more urgent than ever.'

3. Contextualisation

'A localisation-based approach also means grounding work in the specific needs and realities of local communities. Too often, Northern civil society organisations fail to dig deeply into local contexts in the South.

'Take, for example, human rights abuses by a palm oil company in Asia. Northern NGOs may assume that the entire community opposes the company, while in reality, part of the community sees palm oil production as beneficial. Communities are rarely homogeneous~~t~~ hey can be divided, with competing interests shaped by survival, livelihoods, and opportunity.

'We must recognise these nuances. At Samdhana, we grapple with such dilemmas ourselves. In some areas, many people support mining because it generates income that allows them to buy food or send their children to school.

'Meanwhile, we focus on the long-term environmental destruction it causes. Should we oppose these community members, even though their choice meets urgent, daily needs?

'Every situation requires careful analysis. When Northern NGOs campaign, they often generalise, claiming to speak on behalf of 'the community.' Yet communities may be divided—or even unaware of the campaigns being waged in their name.

'True system change must ensure that local systems continue to thrive~~t~~ he very systems Indigenous Peoples have relied on for survival for centuries.'

'The NO to REDD+ campaign is a case in point: presented as representing local communities, but in many cases, those very communities have no idea what the campaign is about.

'Local realities are complex and tied to people's daily struggles. That is why listening—really listening—to communities is essential. Too often, organisations claim to work '*bottom-up*' or '*locally led*.'

'However, when communities disagree with what donors or NGOs believe should happen, suddenly the donor's definition of '*locally led*' prevails. Communities will always have diverse perspectives depending on their circumstances. We must not presume to speak on their behalf. Instead, we must immerse ourselves in their contexts.'

4. Systems Approach

'**The term systems approach has become** fashionable in development cooperation. But if it is to be meaningfully linked to localisation, it must be applied differently.

'Take the coffee value chain, a favourite among donors. The logic is straightforward: help local communities produce coffee that meets European standards for exporting and increase their income. Donors present this as a system change.

'What is often overlooked is the unintended impact on food security. When communities shift production toward export crops like coffee, we have seen hidden hunger emerge because food crops are displaced. Supporting value chains may be popular with donors, but it does not necessarily equate to real system change.

'True system change must ensure that local systems continue to thrive—the very systems Indigenous Peoples have relied on for survival for centuries. In agriculture, for example, local farmers may see seeds as belonging to the whole community, a worldview very different from the ownership models in Europe or the US.

'Even when working with value chains, it is essential to recognise the community's own strengths first: understand what has worked in the past, and then integrate it with innovations for the future.

'For me, system change also means flipping decision-making upside down. Communities themselves must lead. Yes, they may make mistakes at first, but they must be empowered to decide for themselves. Otherwise, system change will remain superficial.'

5. Local Capacity

'**Donors must also invest in the institutional** development of their partners. This enables independence and builds sustainable organisations capable of raising their own funds and reducing dependency. If you finance a project, why not allocate thirty percent of the budget to institutional development?

'This way, they can genuinely strengthen themselves and grow into learning organisations. These resources could support a strategic plan, a communications strategy, or documenting lessons learned. Capacity development should be recognised as an essential part of every project.

'It is equally important to strengthen grassroots organisations and communities. Many communities are not even registered because the concept of legal registration is unfamiliar to them.

'As a result, they miss out on opportunities, since they lack the paperwork to prove they exist as organisations—further marginalising them. Why should registration be a prerequisite for access to resources and capacity building?

'If support is limited only to registered organisations, then the ambition of locally led development rings hollow. In practice, it becomes another form of top-down control.'

'Everything ultimately comes down to justice.'

6. Ecosystem Approach

'**In the humanitarian aid sector, much** emphasis is placed on localisation. For example, humanitarian organisations may promote localisation in disaster risk reduction: they design campaigns and provide funds for local organisations and governments to develop activities that make communities more resilient to earthquakes or cyclones.

'But what is often overlooked is that these same communities and local governments are also responsible for many other pressing issues beyond disaster preparedness. By earmarking funds solely for disaster reduction, donors place communities in a silo. The result is that problems are not addressed sustainably.

'The underlying challenge is not just disaster risk—it is systemic inequality and injustice. These issues are inseparable from land rights, forest management, or rivers polluted by mining.

'If you fail to address the whole ecosystem of inequality and injustice, and instead focus narrowly on reducing disasters, you are missing the point. Small, isolated actions cannot solve structural problems. To be meaningful, always engage with the entire system that produces vulnerability in the first place.'

7. Justice

'**Everything ultimately comes down to** justice. Localisation must confront unequal power relations and work toward fair solutions. You cannot simply support local groups in the South to adapt to climate change without also addressing the damage caused by the North in the first place.

'Take the energy transition now underway in the North. How just is it if the South must supply the minerals for solar panels, or if local communities bear the burden of nickel mining needed for renewable energy in Europe and the US?

'Or if hydropower plants for the North's transition flood entire villages, displacing people from their land? Localisation that ignores these deeper questions of justice risks becoming shallow and incomplete.'

The localisation dish is ready, prepared with seven ingredients. Nozawa hopes it will be served soon. In a world marked by polarisation, wars, rising autocratic leaders, and attacks on civil society, she still chooses optimism. She believes these crises can spark new solidarity between well-meaning people in the North and South.

'I tell colleagues and friends in the US that they are now experiencing the repression we have lived with for decades,' she says. 'These developments remind us how far we still are from a just world.

'But that discomfort, now felt for the first time in the US and some European countries, can give us new energy. It forces us to recognise what is broken in the world—and pushes us to imagine solutions we can pursue together.'

Since 2003, the Samdhana Institute has worked across Southeast Asia to strengthen Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Based in the Philippines, the organisation supports them in securing land rights, managing natural resources sustainably, and responding to the impacts of climate change. Its work is rooted in the values of justice, diversity, and inclusion—principles translated into direct, small-scale support and training with communities themselves.

At the helm is Cristi Nozawa, a veteran of the Philippines' environmental and human rights movement. She first made her name campaigning against large-scale logging and dam projects, and later held international leadership roles at organisations such as BirdLife International. Today, she is a strong advocate for financing that flows directly into the hands of local communities, enabling them to decide for themselves how their lands, resources, and futures are protected.

Samdhana is also a member of the Fair, Green & Global Alliance, co-financed through the Dutch government's Power of Voices partnership, which advocates worldwide for just and sustainable change.

COP30 GLA-Gagga side event
© Green Livelihoods Alliance / ReverberaLab

Locally-Led, Globally Needed: Why COP30 fell short, and how communities stepped up

COP30 did not deliver the forest commitments the world expected. But it did amplify the leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities whose long-standing knowledge systems already protect millions of hectares. What remains is for finance, governance and power structures to catch up. Locally-led action is no longer the alternative; it is the way forward.

Collaborative op-ed article from the Green Livelihoods Alliance (GLA), with contributions from Eva Duarte Davidson (GLA), Valentina Martínez (GFC), Mariana Gomez (Gaia), Joost van Montfort (TBI) and Femy Pinto (NTFP EP)

Before COP30—the UN's annual climate negotiations, held for the first time in the Amazon—we wondered whether global leaders would deliver for tropical forests and the communities who defend them. The short answer from Belém : not yet. But missing commitments are only half the story.

The other part happened outside the official process, in the unprecedented mobilisation and leadership of Indigenous Peoples, women-led groups, local communities, youth and civil society. A power shift that may ultimately matter more than the text governments approved.

Belém was expected to chart a concrete path to halt deforestation by 2030. It did not. The final COP30 text not only failed to establish a binding deforestation roadmap but also removed all references to stopping deforestation in the last days of negotiation.

What survived were voluntary 'forest and climate roadmaps': helpful as signals but lacking teeth, oversight or deadlines. In other words, a roadmap with no road. The absence of fossil fuel phase-out language further weakened the logic: it is impossible to protect forests while fuelling the crisis that destroys them.

And if deforestation continues, we lose not only ecosystems but also the Indigenous knowledge and community-rooted governance systems that make locally-led solutions possible in the first place.

The Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF), launched by Brazil, secured USD 6.7 billion in sponsor capital, with twenty percent nominally reserved for Indigenous Peoples.

But this is less than a quarter of the USD 25 billion needed for full rollout, and the fund faces major governance and equity concerns, including the fact that Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IP&LC) have no decision-making power over these resources.

Civil society and Indigenous Peoples organisations voiced sharp criticism, and the need for direct-access, rights-based and gender-just finance remains unmet. Despite setbacks in the negotiations, several developments pointed in a more hopeful direction.

It is impossible to protect forests while fuelling the crisis that destroys them.

Rights-based and tenure-focused finance gained renewed traction: the Forest Tenure Funders Group extended its landmark COP26 pledge with an additional USD 1.8 billion to strengthen IP&LC land and resource rights.

This was reinforced by the Intergovernmental Land Tenure Commitment, which aims to recognise 160 million hectares of customary land by 2030, alongside a USD 2.5 billion pledge for the Congo Basin.

Wildfire resilience also received long-overdue recognition. The Call to Action on Integrated Fire Management gained backing from nearly sixty countries and institutions, including FAO and ITTO. It provides a voluntary guiding framework to reduce wildfire risk, emphasising prevention and the role of IP&LCs.

Indigenous leadership moved decisively from the margins to centre stage. COP30 hosted a historic three thousand Indigenous leaders, the largest presence ever. Brazil's demarcation of ten new Indigenous territories marked a tangible win.

As one panellist at the GLA side event noted, '*Without Indigenous governance, forests would not have survived as they have*.' Yet the limited number of Indigenous delegates in formal negotiations highlighted the persistent gap between representation and influence.

Gender justice also made concrete advances. The Belén Gender Action Plan, despite losses in human rights language, created new avenues to protect women environmental defenders and integrate care, safety, and participation into national climate processes.

What made COP30 different was what happened outside the plenaries. The People's Summit drew twenty-five thousand participants. The Global Climate March brought seventy thousand people to the streets of Belém .

Forested landscape in Palawan, The Philippines
© Felipe Rodriguez Fundación Gaia Amazonas

Movements drafted and presented a People's Charter to the COP30 Presidency; a clear, collective demand for territorial rights, zero-deforestation and locally rooted climate solutions.

And, it has to be said, this level of civic energy was only possible because Brazil and Colombia, in the context of last year's biodiversity COP16, are functioning democracies. Future COPs in more restricted civic spaces may not offer the same room for people to speak their minds.

At the official UNFCCC side-event hosted by the Green Livelihoods Alliance (GLA) and the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (Gagga), '*From pledges to locally-led climate actions: gender-just Indigenous solutions for forests and climate*' we saw something similar: a full room, an honest conversation and a powerful consensus across very different actors; community leaders, feminist funds, Indigenous organisations, government representatives from Ireland and the Netherlands and philanthropic networks.

As one panellist put it: '*We are not project participants. We are partners in forest governance and climate action.*' Locally-led action is not only about shifting resources; it is about shifting relationships: from control to trust, from consultation to genuine partnership. Power, not projects, determines whether forests stand or fall.

Across GLA countries, Indigenous Peoples and local communities prove daily that locally-led solutions work. But they cannot keep forests standing on rights alone. These approaches endure only when governance aligns with economic realities: reasonable prices, predictable incomes and finance that does not punish communities for being small or remote.

We draw on examples from our previous pre-COP op-ed: In Indonesia's West Sumatra, communities working with KKI WARSI are integrating climate adaptation directly into social forestry across more than thirty thousand hectares.

Through agroforestry, diversified livelihoods and ecosystem restoration, they are increasing tree cover and reducing pressure from extractive industries, showing how Indigenous governance strengthens resilience.

In southern Cameroon, the Avebe and Meyos communities, supported by CED, halted illegal clearing of 1,200 hectares near the Dja Reserve. Their mapping, monitoring and advocacy efforts have now secured protection for more than four thousand hectares, demonstrating how defending rights is central to protecting forests.

And in the Colombian Amazon, the Macroterritory of the Jaguars of Yuruparí, supported by Gaia Amazonas and Tropenbos Colombia, has mapped 3.5 million hectares and strengthened Indigenous territorial governance, contributing to the protection of more than four million hectares of forest.

As Norlita Colili of the Philippines noted at our side-event: 'From *Bertas* land-use systems to *Uma* farming cycles, communities hold the knowledge needed to sustain forests, if only it were recognised and supported.'

These examples show a simple truth: when communities have rights, resources, recognition and economic space, forests stay standing.

Power, not projects, determines whether forests stand or fall.

Panelist Norlita Colili, Pala'wan Indigenous woman environmental and human rights defender from Amas, Brooke's Point, Palawan, in the Philippines.
© Green Livelihoods Alliance / ReverberaLab

COP30 may have delivered finance numbers, but little of it is structured to reach the people actually protecting ecosystems. Community organisations, especially women-led, Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups, still face rigid procedures, short project cycles and reporting systems designed around donor needs rather than community realities.

Promising alternatives exist: the Socio-Environmental Funds of the Global South, the IPAS Fund in Asia and Indonesia's Nusantara Fund. Or, on a smaller scale, the Pastor Rice Small Grants mechanism and the Strengthen the Roots programme.

These mechanisms show how flexible, trust-based, locally governed finance leads to deeper, more durable outcomes, but they remain small compared to the scale of the need.

Locally-led solutions thrive when anchored in strong landscape-level governance. Inclusive platforms that bring together communities, Indigenous authorities, civil society and state institutions help mediate land-use pressures and align decisions.

Ultimately, it is about ensuring that the communities that safeguard forests have real influence over the rules and decisions shaping their territories.

If COP30 taught us anything, it is this: what is agreed in negotiation rooms matters, but the pressure and leadership coming from communities increasingly determine whether global commitments turn into action.

The next two years will determine whether momentum becomes something durable: real, non-market-based finance reaching communities, rights secured, deforestation plans strengthened, and governance reshaped toward equity; or not. Tropical forests remain at risk, but the leadership needed to protect them has never been clearer.

The task now is to mobilise resources to the communities already safeguarding these landscapes and to invest in the civic space, institutions and alliances that allow their leadership to flourish.

There is no shortage of effective, locally rooted solutions. The challenge is to push political leaders to act at the scale required and to press for non-market-based financing architectures that support the solidarity economies we need, rather than perpetuating the ones we have.

Forested landscape in Palawan, The Philippines
© Felipe Rodriguez Fundación Gaia Amazonas

Africa's quiet exit from the aid system

by Hester Francken

Photos by McWilliams Wasswa

'Aid is over,' Moses Isooba says, without nostalgia. From a sunlit office in Kampala, the Ugandan changemaker is helping dismantle the global architecture of dependency, recasting Africa not as a recipient of charity but as a co-author of its own prosperity. The twist? This quiet revolution began long before the aid taps slowed.

As Executive Director of Uganda National *NGO* Forum (*UNNGOF*), an experienced governance expert and innovation promoter, Moses Isooba has been driving the transformation toward local ownership for years through various partner coalitions and social labs.

The first time I met Isooba was on a day few in the development world will forget. Think back: where were you on Tuesday, January 21, 2025—the day after *USAID* announced a freeze on its budgets? That morning, we walked with Isooba, his colleague Ruth, and my team from Vice Versa through the *UNNGOF* garden, toward a meeting room dominated by a large round table. Isooba quietly took the head seat.

He poured coffee for each of us with calm deliberation. But behind his composed manner, his thoughts may have been as tangled as the traffic outside in the sweltering, hilly heart of Kampala. Cars, buses, and boda bodas weaving through chaos, often at a standstill, yet somehow always finding a way forward.

Even now, in a moment of deep uncertainty, Isooba proves to be someone who keeps perspective. His first concern was his staff and their families~~h~~— ow would he support them during these sudden months of pause? But when it came to the longer-term future of communities and their development, Isooba had already been laying the groundwork. He had been mapping out and shaping sustainable pathways alongside stakeholders worldwide for some time.

'Gone are the days of aid,' he tells me, without nostalgia or hesitation, when we speak again five months later. *UNNGOF*, the national platform he leads, brings together civil society organisations across Uganda to jointly shape development policy, advocate for good governance, and protect civic space. Though Isooba is constantly on the move, we found time to reconnect and discuss the changing landscape and his vision for what lies ahead.

He reminds me, without needing to say it outright: to understand where we are or where we are heading, we must first understand where we have come from. 'We are deconstructing an industry as old as 1946. It would be foolhardy of us to start demanding results already.'

> ***'But let us be clear: this is a process, not a one-time event.'***

Isooba has seen this change coming for some time. Now, others are being forced to confront it. 'The dominant system is dying, and an emergent one is taking shape. But let us be clear: this is a process, not a one-time event.'

That emerging system is what Isooba engages with every day through *UNNGOF*. It unites hundreds of organisations to expand civic space, promote good governance, and push for development policy that reflects realities on the ground.

At its heart, this work is about dismantling a system built to centralise control and shut out new thinking. The current architecture of international cooperation traces back to the post-war Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods system.

It did not just bring an economic recovery agenda; it cemented a global framework of power and dependency. The system was never designed with the 'Majority World' in mind. Most of the world had no voice in its creation but was later folded into it, as recipients rather than co-creators.

Resources flowed from the 'Minority World'—where decisions were made—to the Global South, where they were implemented. Control was rooted in strong structures, embedded in institutions, and lodged in minds. 'Generations grew up with it,' Isooba reflects. 'It is not just policy~~i~~— t is how people think. And that is the real challenge.' For decades, development aid was the tool through which the Minority World claimed to pursue global justice~~a~~— t least on paper.

But in practice, it entrenched a system of patron–client relationships built on dependency, control, and mistrust. Local communities were treated as recipients, not as agents of change. Local actors executed projects with donors breathing down their necks. That model rarely led to sustainable transformation. But the tide is turning.

Grassroots movements have been raising their voices for years, amplified by digital connectivity. Now, the broader system is finally starting to shift. 'We do not want colonial money,' Isooba says, capturing a growing sentiment across the Majority World. 'The time of silent acceptance is over.'

He describes a tipping point: 'We are seeing a convergence. In the North, donor countries are pulling back, becoming more inward-looking, shifting budgets in response to far-right populism, Trumpism, and crises closer to home, like Ukraine.

At the same time, across regions like the

Sahel, we are witnessing the rise of nativist leaders who come to power largely on the back of anti-colonial sentiment.' Isooba points to the complex space many African leaders now navigate—where development cooperation increasingly overlaps with trade.

Ministers often wear two hats, negotiating both diplomacy and commerce. Investment is gaining ground, and African countries are being recast as partners rather than recipients. And that is exactly what the Majority World is calling for: equity over charity.

'We are real partners,' Isooba says. 'We give you something, you give us something. Where coffee meets cash.' Yet even as the narrative shifts from aid to 'aid-and-trade,' Isooba observes that much of the underlying system remains unchanged: the financial flows, the power asymmetries, the strings attached.

In his view, aid should always have been framed as investment—not charity. 'But we were never seen as partners because the patron always decides for the client.' Africa, he argues, is not poor—it is systematically drained.

'This is a rich continent—perhaps the richest. But thanks to financial haemorrhage, the money has been flowing out ever since the 1946 system. It is time we redesigned it.' Building a new system takes time, a shift in mindset—and, for many, discomfort.

It demands a new narrative: one where dependency gives way to reciprocity and shared value; where equality is the foundation, not a slogan; and where systems are built with communities, not on them.

For too long, governments and institutions remained in pause mode—trapped in bureaucracy and the comfort of the known. 'Many relied on aid as business-as-usual. And yes, aid was still sweet; they were addicted. Now, they are compelled to think differently.'

The future is still uncertain. The shift has begun, but it remains fragile. 'I say this with an abundance of caution,' he adds. 'Yes, we are seeing change. But this is a mindset shift of a system nearly a century old. It will take time.'

Isooba describes the phase we are in: 'There is the world we dream of; the world we have; and then the world we can get. But we are being too hasty, trying to assess too soon whether we are already in the world we want. We must allow the process to unfold.'

If there is one lesson emerging early, it is resilience. 'We all lived on a starvation lifestyle,' he reflects, recalling the sudden disappearance of budget support. 'But that experience has built resilience—on both sides: within governments and civil society.'

When it comes to leadership responses, it is still too early to define clear patterns. Still, Isooba points to Nigeria and South Africa as examples where ministers used the decline in donor funding as an opportunity to make bold, strategic shifts—particularly in health systems.

By reallocating domestic budgets, increasing public financing, and investing in local production, these governments are moving toward greater self-reliance. Their efforts are further strengthened by digital innovation and new collaborative models—both nationally and internationally.

In Nigeria, this enabled the rollout of the publicly funded *Oxford R21* malaria vaccine. In South Africa, it led to a multibillion-rand expansion of the national health budget—hiring thousands of new doctors and nurses.

> ***Africa, he argues, 'is not poor—it is systematically drained.'***

For Isooba, a long-time champion of locally led development, real progress begins with seeing development as an ecosystem—an interconnected whole made up of communities, national organisations, and donors, all in continuous interaction. He sees early signs of movement. Not yet revolutionary, but meaningful.

'We are seeing a shift from funding relationships rooted in control and mistrust, toward more equitable partnerships—ones grounded in trust, coaching, and shared power. As we build this new, emergent system,' Isooba explains, 'we are selectively carrying forward some of the useful 'genetic material' from the old dominant system.

'We are also discarding the congenital traits that held us back, like power, privilege, and money. We are starting to see real change in how donors relate to us,' he says. 'That is partly because, a few years ago, we launched the Shift the Power movement. It challenged *NGOs* to rethink how they work—and made clear that the choice was theirs: transform, die well, or die badly.'

Many chose transformation. And from that, the idea of locally led development began to take root; not just as rhetoric, but as operational reality. 'Now we are seeing attention turn to how local leadership, local financing, local knowledge, and local implementation can be fully deployed,' Isooba says.

'Every donor, every *NGO* is now aware of these four pillars.' The old model, development for communities, is giving way to something fundamentally different: development with communities.

'Today, whether it's a bilateral donor, a multilateral agency, or a traditional *NGO,* they understand this truth: if you are serious about development with communities, you must also recognise that communities bring their own assets to the table.'

At the heart of this shift is the principle of subsidiarity: the belief that decisions should be made at the most local level possible. As Isooba puts it, 'The community may not speak English, Spanish, or French—but those closest to the problem often have the best solution.'

The slow but steady move toward locally led development demands something of the sector. 'We in the development sector have parachuted in with our own solutions for too long,' Isooba says. 'But the community is the main theatre of activity. If we pay attention to that, things will roll out.'

Yet the greatest resistance, he notes, is often internal: within organisations themselves. Achieving change means aligning 'body and soul'—ensuring that internal systems and structures genuinely reflect the new vision.

'The program staff might fully grasp the idea of locally led development, but the audit department still treats partners as a risk. That mistrust is still in the system's *DNA*.'

Isooba points to a deeply embedded logic—one that does not just govern the development sector, but echoes across global finance. Anything new, unfamiliar, or locally designed is typically seen not as potential, but as risk.

'It is a mindset,' he says. 'It is hardwired into our systems—and that is what ultimately holds back transformation. If we do not deal with the mindset,' Isooba warns, 'we will just repackage the *INGO* model into national outfits. We have to be absolutely careful that we are not building yet another power centre.'

Real change will not happen overnight. There is no blueprint for systemic transformation. But it begins with a new mindset, a shift in intention, and bold financial innovation. What is needed is a fundamental culture change; one that moves us from a logic of risk-transfer to one of risk-sharing:

'Nobody gets it right at once. But we must start,' Isooba says. He offers what he calls a 'vaccine approach' to building a healthier system: 'Three steps: Direct funding, unrestricted funding and multi-year funding.' He repeats them like a mantra. 'Without those ingredients, we stay stuck in project logic—offering paracetamol for symptom relief.'

True transformation—of both structures and people—calls for space to develop with, not on, communities. For local leadership, local financing, local design, and local implementation to thrive, funding must flow with awareness, not fear. And above all, we must be vigilant: not to replace one power structure with another, just better dressed. Structure is not the same as trust.

Isooba remains grounded. What he observes is resilience. What he calls for is patience—and a collective willingness to learn, step by step. With that alignment of vision, resources, trust, and shared responsibility, a different narrative becomes not just possible, but also inevitable. It becomes a transition already in motion.

Rethink, Reclaim, Rebuild

They say budgets are built overseas,
A tightening of belts, a slow, dimming grin.
They speak of a crisis, a fracture, a crack signal,
they whisper, of no turning back If we don't meet the terms

But here, in the heat, where the red earth meets the sky,
We hear a different truth, a different cry.
It's not a sound of panic, a desperate plea,
It's the quiet, steady hum of a people... being free
Listening to us from us, not from those who were told about us

Maybe, they said. *Maybe*.
Maybe this is the moment Africa stops... waiting.
Stops assuming the answers on a distant shore.
Maybe this is the moment we reclaim the knowledge at our core and raise *"obokolwedo"*
The divine knowledge our gods granted us with

For our greatest wealth...
...is not beneath the soil, in the dark and the deep
Not even the agriculture they claim it's our backbone
It's in the minds that wonder, the hands that reap.
It's in the experiences lived, the innovations we keep
Its in the legacy passed by those great ancestors read about
But the system... oh, the system wears a blindfold tight.
It says an idea only *glows* with a Western light

That its that lights that shines our darkness
It thinks leadership is a river that only flows one way.
And partnership is a gift you receive, not a house you build and stay
Not a comfort you turn to when the sky turns dark

But we have seen it.
When the external river dries to a stream,
When even rain can no longer drop its last
The land doesn't die... it learns to dream.
It reorganizes. It remembers its name.
It steps into the power it was told to tame.

This is the work.
To debunk the notions, to dismantle the lies.
The stereotypes that cloud our collective skies.
To question the stories we've been sold and told,
The narratives of weakness, of being controlled.

This isn't about blame. It's not a bitter refrain.
It's not about trading one master for a chain.
It's about the mindset. The deep, silent seed.
The things we must unlearn, for a different world to succeed.

So the question isn't if the old model will decay.
The question is... what will we build in its place today?
What becomes possible when we finally see
That help isn't a direction, but a reciprocity?

We may not have the blueprint, the perfect design.
But we have a beginning, a new, fragile line.
It starts now, with a clarity, bright.
A reimagining... of what is true, and what is right.

So listen.
Listen to the silence after the old aid retreats.
That's not an emptiness.
It's the sound of our own heartbeats.
It's the rhythm of a future, more equal, more ground...
A new partnership... finally being found.

Charity begins at home, so Africa wake up and we build homes

Before our generation are taught about us by those who hear about us

Atim Patricia,
(Poet)

Atim Patricia (21) is a student at Muni University in Arua (Uganda), pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology. She is a spoken word poet who draws inspiration from her surroundings, everyday life, personal experiences, and the evolving cultures around her. Her work explores identity, resilience, and the stories that shape communities.

PEACE in WAR

by Cissy Nalumansi

Photos by Dalia Association

Amidst the devastating and ongoing genocide in Palestine, a remarkable group of Palestinian women found the courage to come together. They organised a community-led charity bazaar spearheaded by the remarkable Aya Badaha and created something profound. In the midst of war and a siege on humanitarian aid, they carved out a space for connection, hope, and local empowerment.

Saturdays have always been special in Aya Badaha's life. Every weekday, she had to leave for school before sunrise. On some mornings, she would crawl out of bed before the neighbour's rooster's maddening crow and on other mornings, the rooster would crow her into wakefulness.

Many a time, she fantasised about that irritating rooster making a delicious chicken musakhan dish. I am sure the rooster was delighted that it did not hail from the Badaha household. Aya knew she was privileged to receive an education while many girls in her community could not.

Still, the daily routine left her feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. But on Saturdays, she felt in control again. She would watch the magnificent rising of the sun against the stone and unbaked brick buildings on the streets of Palestine's Deir Ammah, her hometown. It was her favourite thing to do in the morning. It was magical.

And then there were the bazaars. Every Saturday, Deir Ammah transformed from a quiet village into a bustling hub of activity, as bakers, spice merchants, sweet shops, restaurants, café , leatherworkers, jewellers, textile artisans, tailors, garment makers, and many others filled its heart with life and trade. But not just for business, it was a community coming together.

It was a whirlwind of activity, a microcosm of life itself. Children, their faces sticky with sweets, would dart through the lively crowds, their laughter echoing through the market. Meanwhile, their parents—chatting with friends and neighbours— irelessly kept a watchful eye on them.

Girls would giggle and chatter while trying on vibrant gowns and elaborate dresses that they had no business buying, while husbands would wait impatiently for hours for their wives to rummage through piles of new dresses, bags and shoes.

Several couples, seeking respite from the week's demands, relaxed in café , their conversations unfolding gently against the backdrop of the market's vibrant symphony. Nearby, the elderly— aces etched with the wisdom of experience—shared stories and laughter with younger generations, demonstrating the timeless art of enjoying a bazaar and, in doing so, rediscovering a piece of their own youth.

As for Aya, she always had her eyes on handmade crafts and traditional embroidered items, and would race her cousin Marah to grab them first. Her Saturdays continued to be special, with the sunrises and the bazaars.

Even after she got married and moved to Sinjil in the occupied West Bank, they remained as blissful, like a cherished trinket from a first love. That is, until Saturday, October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched an operation against Israel after years of oppression. The attack triggered a wave of violence and a rapid escalation of war across the region, especially in Gaza and parts of the occupied West Bank.

The once-vibrant towns that Aya held so dear were transformed into a scene of utter devastation. The sturdy stone and baked brick buildings that had stood as testaments to Palestine's rich history were reduced to rubble and dust. The bustling marketplaces, once brimming with hope and opportunity during bazaars, were now desolate expanses of ash and debris.

Norman Cousins, in his abundant wisdom, once said that war was an invention of the human minda— nd that the human mind could also invent peace. For Aya, that quote had never felt truer than in that moment. The ongoing genocide had rapidly spiralled into a devastating humanitarian crisis, turning the region into a warzone where civilians were relentlessly caught in the crossfire.

> ***If the human mind could invent such destruction, it could just as powerfully imagine and build peace, even in fragments, even in the ruins.***

Mothers watched helplessly as their babies went days without food. The small, income-generating businesses that once thrived in the bazaars, lifelines for many families, were now either shuttered or buried beneath the rubble of continuous bombings. For many, there was no access to essential needs.

Coming from the Dalia Association, an organisation deeply committed to the belief that local resources should be controlled by communities, this reality was a painful contradiction to everything Aya and the Association stood for. She believed that if resources could be redirected back into the hands of the people, then, to some extent, communities might find relief from this exhausting war.

Amid the horror, Cousins' quote lit a spark in her. If the human mind could invent such destruction, it could just as powerfully imagine and build peace, even in fragments, even in the ruins.

Fuelled by an innate sense of hope and a bold vision, Aya chose to embody Cousins' faith in the human mind's capacity to build peace. She dared to believe that minds like hers were capable of much more, not only inventing peace, but also creating local income sources, generating opportunities, and reclaiming control.

This belief was not rooted in naiveté but in

lived experience. She had witnessed firsthand the tranquillity and harmony that once thrived in her hometown of Deir Ammah—during the sunrises and the bustling bazaars—and how the community sustained itself through them.

Even in Sinjil, she had found pockets of it. Driven by this belief, Aya embarked on a journey of bringing the community back together at the bazaar. As Nour Nusseibeh, Executive Director of the Dalia Association, often says, communities that support each other offer the world a powerful example of resilience and inspiration.

Aya believed that, through her efforts, the world might take a page from that book. There is a saying that when women support each other, incredible things happen. Aya had witnessed this power time and again in her role as a programme officer at the Dalia Association.

Even though times had changed, Aya dared to recreate the atmosphere of the bazaars she had seen in her youth—he feeling those Saturdays once gave her.

Her unwavering belief in the strength of female collaboration inspired her to launch the *Women Supporting Women* bazaar. This space would bring together forty-five women to undergo specialised training in management, financial literacy, and marketing. Afterwards, they would showcase and sell their products, connect with their community, build valuable networks, and increase their visibility.

Still, this mission was not one to be taken lightly. Israel continued to drop bombs on Palestine. People were mourning the loss of loved ones and the destruction of their homes. How was Aya expected to pull off a bazaar in such a setting? And yet, despite the growing challenges, the turmoil and despair only strengthened the resolve of Aya and her team to bring this empowering event to life.

She carefully handpicked fifteen remarkable women from the *Hands of Tale* project to showcase a rich variety of traditional Palestinian crafts. This included embroidery, leatherwork, soap making, ceramics, wooden crafts, straw products, sculptures, food items, and other handmade items.

Even though times had changed, Aya dared to recreate the atmosphere of the bazaars she had seen in her youth—he feeling those Saturdays once gave her. To her, they were a blank canvas on which she could paint the present she longed for; A present filled with peace.

Once upon a time, in the small village of Nasreddin Hoca Türbesi, lived a wise and considerate man named Mullah Nasr al-Din. He lived with his wife, Fatimah, and had a deep love for fruits and vegetables. One evening, as Fatimah began preparing dinner, she realised she was missing a few ingredients. So, she asked Mullah to ride his donkey to the market and fetch them quickly.

Mullah agreed to his wife's request and, not long after, set off to the market on his small white donkey. There, as always, he was captivated by the colourful display of fruits and vegetables lining the shops. However, rather than staying and enjoying the scene, he hurried to get the items to Fatimah.

Still, he could not resist bringing home a few extra fruits. At each stop, he chatted with friends and picked up a little more. By the time he was done, Mullah found himself with an unexpectedly heavy load; watermelons, eggplants, potatoes, and vegetables.

With great difficulty, he rode his donkey backwards so as not to dishonour his friends by turning his back on them. One of his friends then handed him the heavy bag. Realising just how heavy it was, Mullah did not want to burden his donkey with it. So instead of placing it on the saddle, he held the bag at the end of his outstretched arm, away from the donkey.

And with that, the donkey began walking steadily toward Mullah's house. On the way home, one of his students saw him supporting his tired, outstretched arm with the other. Curious, the student asked why he did not simply put the bag on the saddle like everyone else coming from the market.

Mullah replied that he did not want to place the entire burden on his donkey. Since the donkey was carrying him, he would carry the load. Mesmerised by his teacher's kindness and thoughtfulness, the student walked away inspired.

Aya, too, had long been inspired by Mullah's stories and how he used his quiet wisdom not just to better his own life, but to uplift those around him. When she organised the bazaar in Ramallah, she applied that same wisdom, ensuring that every exhibitor received payment, regardless of their sales.

While her primary goal was to cultivate a sense of peace in a region torn apart by war, she also understood the immense hardships these women had endured. Any form of financial support would be invaluable.

To achieve this, she ensured that the organising teams would sell tickets to attendees, with all proceeds going directly to the participating women. This allowed them not only to sustain their projects but also to earn an income. This way, mothers would provide a meal for their starving children or at least afford a few basic necessities.

While Aya recognised the importance of international aid—especially in desperate times, like when access to Gaza was blocked and people were left to starve without medical care—she also believed in the power of community philanthropy. She saw it as a vital force that could create an immediate impact where it was needed most.

Community philanthropy fosters a culture of giving that strengthens social bonds and resilience, inspiring others to get involved and creating a ripple effect of collective action and local innovation. Aya understood that when grassroots initiatives like the *Women Supporting Women* bazaar succeed, they not only uplift individuals but also motivate others in the community to contribute their time, skills, or resources.

In this way, international aid could supplement local efforts to better the lives of the community. If Mullah had been in Gaza at that time, Aya was certain he would have done the same. Just as he once carried the weight himself to spare his donkey the burden, Aya chose to do the same for her community through the bazaar.

On the Saturday of the bazaar, A. M. Qattan Foundation Cultural Centre saw an influx of attendees as members of the community poured in to support and celebrate the women showcasing their art and products. From traditional Palestinian crafts, such as embroidery, leatherwork, soap making, ceramics, wooden items, straw products, and sculptures, to food and other handmade goods.

For a brief moment, it felt as if there was no war outside the walls of Ramallah. Representatives from government, the private sector, and civil society mingled with participants, while attendees networked with one another.

Dalia Association's belief that initiatives like the bazaar are key to sustaining small and micro-projects had never been more vividly put into practice. This was especially true for women-led projects, given the role women play in strengthening the economic resilience of Palestinian families and increasing their participation in the economy.

As the bazaar unfolded, Aya could not help but feel a powerful sense of déjà vu. It was Deir Ammah all over again. She was swept up in

the familiar imagery of a community coming together and the showmanship of resilience and community-based change.

The human mind, which Norman Cousins believed could invent both war and peace, had, in this moment, invented peace. Or at least, a semblance of it. Aya took a pause, just as she used to every Saturday morning while watching the sunrise, to savour the tranquillity of the moment. To remember what peace once felt like~~b~~efore the war.

She thought of Umm Mahmoud's rooster that used to crow in the neighbourhood and send her haphazardly out of sleep every weekday. She missed the old days. She had longed for a feeling of normality and she was grateful that the bazaar offered her one.

The people were happy with the fellowship that the bazaar brought them. The participants would go back home with an income and their families would have a meal. It was not enough but it was a good start. Now, Aya would imprint a new memory in her mind. Not of the ongoing war in her homeland, but one where peace in war was possible.

For a brief moment, it felt as if there was no war outside the walls of Ramallah.

She missed the old days. She had longed for a sense of normalcy, and for a fleeting moment, the bazaar gave her that. She was grateful.

The people were happy, lifted by the fellowship the event had created. The participants would return home with some income and their families would have a meal. It was not enough but it was a good start.

And now, Aya would imprint a new memory. Not one marked by the devastation of the ongoing war in her homeland, but one where peace in war was possible.

Stewards for a more resilient Turkana

Text: Marc Broere
Pictures Moses Mbotela

Two different qualities, one shared vision: to leave a lasting impact on their community. Meet Rael Nkoi Lomoti and Ambassador Loroo Esekon Emmanuel, two inspiring young community leaders from Turkana, in northwestern Kenya, who have united their efforts for change.

The Turkana, like many indigenous peoples, are not simply 'survivors' of marginal conditions—they are stewards of a unique worldview that blends environmental wisdom, communal strength, and cultural depth.

Recognising and respecting their knowledge is not just a matter of cultural preservation—it is a roadmap to global resilience and sustainability. Carrying this heritage forward, Rael and Loroo are drawing on their unique perspectives and experiences to strengthen their community and shape a more resilient Turkana.

Rael Nkoi Lomoti grew up in Turkana but carried her talent far beyond the region, playing as a defensive midfielder in the Kenya Women's Premier League with Gaspo Women FC. Yet, even while shining on the national stage, she felt a constant pull back home.

She realised that too many girls in Turkana were being denied the chance to dream—to go to school, to play, or simply to be children. So, in 2018, she returned to Lodwar and founded Desert Roses Football Club, the first all-girls football team in the region.

The beginning was anything but easy. There were no fields, little support, and plenty of cultural resistance. But Rael pressed on. Today, Desert Roses has grown into a fully-fledged Community-Based Organisation (CBO), nurturing over two hundred girls from twenty schools. Its junior and senior teams train at dawn and after dusk, just to beat the heat.

Through football, Rael is offering far more than lessons in passing or shooting. She is teaching confidence, teamwork, discipline, and self-worth. Under her guidance, many girls have avoided early marriage, stayed in school, and started dreaming bigger.

Her work has drawn attention from both local and national media, amplifying her voice as she advocates for a proper sports facility for girls in Turkana. Her dream? To give girls the same rights and chances that boys have—to lead, to learn, and to live freely.

While Rael leads on the field, Loroo Esekon Emmanuel is busy in the workshop, transforming broken metal and discarded plastics into tools of change. A passionate artisan and founder of Turkana Tech Youths Hub, Loroo trains young people in practical skills such as welding, plumbing, agribusiness, salon work, and environmental conservation.

His most famous invention is a modern reinvention of the traditional Turkana stool, the *Ekicholong*, crafted from recycled metal and plastic. But it is more than a stool—it is a symbol of sustainability, creativity, and pride in local culture.

His work blends traditional knowledge with climate-smart ideas, reshaping how people view both waste and heritage. This approach reduces deforestation by offering alternatives, where men would otherwise cut down trees just to carve a wooden stool. In 2024, Loroo made history by becoming the first youth from Turkana to win the Presidential Innovation Award.

His work earned him national recognition, a cash grant, and commendation from leaders, including Kenya's top innovation and education officials. Today, Loroo continues to mentor hundreds of young people across Turkana, especially those in vulnerable areas. Rael and Loroo may walk different paths, one through sports and the other through innovation, but their goal is the same: to uplift and empower the youth of Turkana.

They are keeping girls in school and out of early marriages; creating jobs through skills training and local innovation; tackling climate change with practical, community-driven solutions; and restoring cultural pride while building a modern future. Their journeys demonstrate that leadership does not only come from boardrooms or cities.

It can rise from a dusty football pitch at dawn or from the sparks of a welding torch in a small workshop. It comes from believing in your people when no one else does. Rael Nkoi Lomoti and Loroo Esekon Emmanuel are proof that when youth lead, communities thrive.

But their path has not been without challenges. Rael was fortunate when the Australian ambassador to Kenya came across a video of her work and decided to support Desert Roses. Since then, she has also received backing from two other international donors—one from the United States and another from the Netherlands.

Loroo, on the other hand, has had to rely on the presidential recognition and a series of awards that he has received. He has also been appointed the national TVET Ambassador in Kenya, leading campaigns to inspire youth across Kenya to embrace vocational training.

But for a starting CBO, it is difficult to enter the donor world. Having the right networks makes all the difference, says Rael. In Turkana, she has seen many young CBOs struggle—not because of a lack of vision, but because they lacked the right connections to secure funding. 'Their grand dreams,' she says, 'have gone up in smoke for lack of support.'

One way forward is ensuring that the stories of these organisations are recorded and shared with the world. Rael and Loroo have managed this well—they are natural communicators and frequently appear in the media. However, this does not apply to others. 'Some local organisations do great work, but they lack visibility. People do not see what they are doing,' Rael says.

Another hurdle is gatekeeping by more established NGOs. Potential donors sometimes advise Rael and Loroo to first approach these seasoned organisations; to learn from them, or even collaborate. But their experience has been far from encouraging. 'These organisations often see emerging CBOs as a threat,' she explains.

'They ask you to share your ideas, listen with great interest, and then either dismiss you by saying they cannot help you—or worse, take your idea, run with it, and secure the international funding for themselves.'

Loroo nods: 'I had the idea of organising a peace caravan by motorcycle across counties that are in conflict over livestock. At each stop, we would host an activity. I pitched the idea to a large church known for its peace work, hoping they would support it. They declined. To my surprise, I later saw them implement the exact same idea, without ever acknowledging that it came from me.'

'But instead of teaching us how to fish, they give us a daily portion of fish.'

Now, a new alliance has taken root. Turkana Desert Roses and Turkana Tech Youth Hubs have joined forces. Long champions of each other's work on social media, they have now formalised their collaboration. Although their work may seem worlds apart, they are united by one common challenge: climate change.

Loroo stresses that awareness about climate change must grow within the community, because its effects have major consequences on their pastoralist way of life. 'Turkana is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change,' he explains.

'Deforestation, land degradation, prolonged droughts, and water scarcity are on the rise. Coupled with limited economic opportunities for youth and women, this environmental crisis threatens both livelihoods and the very sustainability of the local population.'

One striking example comes from everyday life: in Turkana, every man traditionally owns a wooden stool for herding. But each stool requires an entire tree to be cut down. To break this cycle of deforestation, Loroo designed an alternative made from recycled metal and plastic, for which he was awarded the Presidential Innovation Award.

Rael approaches the subject through women: her players and especially their mothers. 'It is often young mothers who cut down trees to make charcoal to sell. It is one of the few ways they can earn an income. However, it is short-term money that destroys our environment. We want to encourage them to stop this and instead explore alternatives, like small-scale farming or kitchen gardens.'

Long-term change is paramount for Rael and Loroo, not just in their projects but in tackling climate change. They look around and worry that Turkana has grown too dependent on short-term fixes. 'We have so many aid organisations here,' Rael says.

'But they rarely offer long-term solutions. They stay for three or five years, with the goal of reducing poverty. But instead of teaching us how to fish, they give us a daily portion of fish. When they leave, the problem remains, sometimes even

'They ask you to share your ideas, listen with great interest, and then either dismiss you by saying they cannot help you or worse, take your idea, run with it, and secure the international funding for themselves.'

worse. Do not give us food— each us how to farm.'

She pauses for a moment, then adds: 'This is what I admire about Ambassador Loroo's projects. He teaches young people a trade. There is hardly any other organisation in Turkana doing that. He gives people in hopeless situations a future. The people in his projects come from deep in the village and have never attended school. They do not speak English— not even Swahili— yet he takes them in and trains them from scratch.'

Loroo looks proudly toward the gate of his workshop in his compound. 'This gate was made entirely by one of our students. He had never been to school and could not read or write. He was one of many young people involved in conflicts and fights with Ethiopian youth over land and livestock, where most of them lose their lives in the process. But instead of going to war, he came to us and we have given him the opportunity to learn a trade.'

Together, Loroo and Rael launched the Turkana Green Initiative. The project that combines the power of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) with community-based sports to empower residents, especially youth and women. The goal is to turn communities into environmental stewards while building climate resilience and creating green jobs.

By promoting sustainable practices through education, skills training, and sports, the initiative aims to combat deforestation and environmental degradation in Turkana. They have ambitious goals. Rael outlines them with conviction: 'We want to train one thousand youth and women in environmentally friendly TVET skills such as tree nursery management, water harvesting, renewable energy, welding, and agroforestry.

'We also aim to plant and nurture one hundred thousand trees across schools, community spaces, and degraded land. Through sports events, we will raise climate awareness and mobilise young people. Beyond that, we plan to establish ten community-led green enterprises to create income opportunities and launch an Environmental Ambassadors Network in Turkana to champion long-term conservation.'

Loroo nods, adding to the list of activities: 'Environmental education workshops and awareness campaigns. Practical training sessions on sustainable land use, tree planting, and green technologies.

Establishment of community tree nurseries and reforestation sites. Monthly football tournaments and sports days with conservation themes. Creation of green entrepreneurship mentorship programs. Collaboration with local government, schools, and elders to promote indigenous climate solutions.'

As we wrap up our conversation, I ask what drives them to take on this project together. Loroo smiles. 'I love Rael and see her as my most important mentor. She is the one who encouraged me to set up an organisation.

She left Turkana to study social work in Nairobi, but returned and shared everything she learned with me because she believes in me. I trust her completely, and she trusts me. We have the same energy, the same vibes, and the same love for our community.'

Rael beams. 'Ambassador and I share a common goal: to give back to our community. With the little he has, he still helps his community. If you can do so much with ten percent, imagine what we could achieve together with one hundred. He is a go-getter, just like me. We want to leave a legacy and a big impact on our community.'

The goal is to turn communities into environmental stewards while building climate resilience and creating green jobs.

When asked about each other's qualities— Loroo's football skills and Rael's TVET qualities— they burst into laughter. 'If my toilet is clogged, I think I can fix it myself,' Rael jokes, 'although I am not a real plumber. Even with electricity, I will not immediately call Loroo; I will first try to solve it myself. I was good at technical subjects in school.'

Loroo, on the other hand, admits he will never make it to the Kenyan national football team: 'I am definitely not a good football player. I admire Rael's skills on the pitch, but I cannot do anything about it myself. I am not even a fan of football and do not support any club. You will never see me walking around in an Arsenal or Manchester United shirt, but I am eagerly waiting for the moment when I will get a Desert Roses shirt. That will be the only sports shirt I will ever wear.'

Localisation is not rocket science

Saranel Benjamin

Localisation is neither novel nor new to Mama Cash (MC) and Leading from the South *(LFS);* it has always been central to their work. By shifting power, they have enabled communities to reclaim decision-making over the changes they seek. In a conversation with MC's *Saranel Benjamin* (now former) and Happy Mwende Kinyili, and LFS leaders Anisha Chugh (Women's Fund Asia) and Françoise Moudouthe (African Women's Development Fund), one message was clear: localisation is not only possible but the surest path to lasting gender justice.

by Elizabeth Kameo

Without hesitation and with a hearty laugh, Happy Mwende Kinyili responds to the question of whether certain development organisations are right to claim that localisation is next to impossible.

'Stop doing the work you are doing and give us the money. We have been doing it well and at scale. Localisation has always been at the heart of Mama Cash since its inception forty years ago.'

She elaborates: 'When Mama Cash began, it was one woman who had inherited wealth turning to her local community and saying, *'Folks, help me figure out how to move this money to the rest of the world.'*

'From the start, Mama Cash has been about moving resources to activists across the globe. Over the years, we have continued refining that approach to centre even more marginalised voices. That is how we work.'

Leading from the South (*LFS*) Co-Executive Director Françoise Moudouthe supports Mwende Kinyili, pointing out that *LFS* is localisation in practice. 'It is in the name; it is our core concept. Long before it was called localisation, that principle was at the heart of what *LFS* has always stood for.

'Localisation is about shifting the centre of gravity of where decisions are made and key concepts are defined. The way things have been set up in the international development context has been that the centre of gravity is in the Global North. Localisation is about changing this,' says Moudouthe.

Francoise Moudouthe

Saranel Benjamin, Co-Executive Director of MC, explains that localisation is neither new nor novel to the organisation, but has been an instinctive part of the way MC has worked for more than forty years.

'It speaks to the way in which we fund and the long-term, flexible, core support we provide. We do not design projects; we are not implementers. We provide core funding to groups and organisations that work at the local level. It is the local movements, local and community-led organisations that tell us what issues in their contexts should be supported through grant funding,' says Benjamin.

Anisha Chugh, Executive Director of *WFA,* which is part of the *LFS* consortium, emphasises that since those who experience marginalisation and discrimination are best placed to confront it—women, girls, and gender-diverse people, particularly in the Global South—localisation means recognising that power already resides within communities. It is not given; it is already there.

But how have they been successful at localising over the years, even before this became a buzzword? 'From 1983,' says Mwende Kinyili, 'when five radical lesbian feminists gathered around a kitchen table, they were already practising what we now call localisation and participatory grantmaking— long before these became buzzwords. That legacy continues to push us to do better. We do not claim to have perfected it, but we know we are getting better at it.'

Mwende Kinyili credits this success to MC's commitment to a movement-building approach; one that ensures those most affected by the issues remain at the centre of decision-making, and that funds go to organisations that are connected.

'It is the activists that make decisions around what we fund, where we fund, how we fund and how much we fund. We fund people who are part of the movement. That is what it means to be part of a movement-building approach: that people are connected and coordinated, and we support that connection and coordination,' explains Mwende Kinyili.

Mama Cash (MC)

Founded in the Netherlands in 1983, Mama Cash (MC) is the first international women's fund in the world. Its vision is to ensure that feminist collective action is led by women, girls and trans and intersex people. MC envisions a world in which women, girls and trans and intersex people have the power and resources to fully participate in creating a peaceful, just, and sustainable world.
MC takes a movement-based approach by providing grants and accompaniment to strengthen activists as movement actors. At the same time, it mobilises resources by fundraising and influencing the donor community to channel more support toward feminist activism.

'Locally-based organisations are in the best position to decide how resources are used in furthering their agendas. Movements are diverse, their experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, and colonisation are so different, not only within continents, but within countries and communities,' says Chugh.

Since decision-making and grant-making are central to localisation, Benjamin explains, this is why the supported local movements and communities take the lead in setting the agenda and telling MC what needs to be funded.

'It is not just about transferring money from one side to another while replicating the same systems, structures, and compliances without shifting power,' Benjamin explains.

'Our interpretation of localisation is precisely a disruption of that. The decision-making power over what needs to be funded does not rest with MC. It is not merely about moving money, but about dismantling entrenched power structures.'

She continues, 'It is also embedded in the influencing work that MC does with other donors, such as advocating for more and better funding. By better, we mean money that is long-term, flexible, and free from the heavy burdens and compliances that often accompany funds from the Global North.'

Localisation means recognising that power already resides within.

Without a doubt, the contexts in which MC and *LFS's* partner organisations and networks operate are changing rapidly. Investing in a movement-building approach that strengthens grassroots leadership and fosters collective action ensures that women's rights organisations and advocates have access to flexible, long-term funding that they can adapt and use according to their own realities.

According to Benjamin, MC and *LFS* act as a protective wall, shielding activists from the burdens of short-term, restrictive funding and the heavy red tape often imposed by bilateral donors.

By partnering with bilateral donors and private philanthropy, and absorbing much of the due diligence requirements, MC, *LFS* and other feminist and women's funds enable movements to focus on their essential work of advancing justice. This approach reflects how MC and *LFS* interpret localisation.

But while localisation may be gaining traction, Mwende Kinyili cautions that it is equally important to be clear about what localisation is not. 'Localisation is not some Global North organisation registering an office in Nairobi, shipping in someone to head the office, and hiring a bunch of local people.

'Localisation is fundamentally about shifting the power. It is not just where I lay my head to sleep. That does not mean that you have localised. Moving decision-makers from one place to another and calling it 'local' does not make it so,' She emphasises.

Since localisation seeks to address broader issues of inequality and discrimination, Chugh stresses the importance of engaging those who live these realities, as they not only understand the local challenges but also hold the knowledge of solutions.

'When we talk about skills, what do we actually mean? Is it simply how well you can write a report, or is it the ability to understand a problem and find solutions to address it? Localisation must be seen in this light.

'It is not just about teaming up with or funding someone based in a country, but about funding communities that are directly impacted, working in true partnership with them, and recognising that they are the best solution you are looking for,' says Chugh.

And while localisation is significant in bringing about change for women's funds, so is the role of local and cross-border movements. 'It comes down to the assurance that we have to do this together', says Moudouthe.What we are up against is so widespread that collective action is essential.

'Investing in that action, whether locally or across borders, is key. Each time we bring our partners together, we see the power of connection. Women's funds help drive this change by providing not only financial resources but also spaces, access, and networks,'

Benjamin: 'We often say, and it does not always land well, that we fund in a borderless way; we do not confine our work to one country. It is not just about providing financial resources but also about building linkages and connections.

'That is one of the strengths of funds like MC and *LFS*: they give us visibility into emerging issues long before they become trends in the Global North.' For those organisations that contend that localisation is next to impossible and challenging at best, the Co-EDs offer evidence to the contrary.

It is not merely about moving money, but about dismantling entrenched power structures.

'Because localisation has become a buzzword,' Moudouthe explains, 'many think there is a ready-made 'recipe.' Those who claim it is impossible do so because they try to apply that recipe in any context, using their own ingredients. But without changing the approach, it will never work.

'Our very existence proves that it can be done. Localisation is not only possible; it is impactful.

Anisha Chugh

Happy Mwende

It works, but only when carried out well, in a disruptive and transformative way.' She advises other organisations to identify what works best in their own context and put it into practice, rather than simply replicating what others are doing.

'**Mama Cash has just marked forty years,** *LFS* will celebrate ten years next year, and the International Indigenous Women's Forum (*FIMI*), a member of the *LFS* consortium, recently celebrated 25 years. This legacy shows that we have been doing this at scale, reaching some of the hardest-to-reach places and groups outside the mainstream development world.

'And we have done it with localisation at the core. Our system has been set up so that it moves funds in a way that actually gives life to this definition of localisation,' says Benjamin. 'Change has been possible because it is led by those most directly impacted.

'Take Uganda, for example: many queer activists there often say, *'it was the feminists who kept us alive when everyone else was trying to kill us.'* That kind of solidarity is a world-changing kind of work.

'The green wave in Latin America was possible because those seeking abortions, for themselves, their friends, relatives, or mothers, were the very ones leading the struggle; again, life-changing. This scale and depth of impact is only possible because those most directly affected are the ones driving the change; and they are the people we fund.'

Moudouthe says that prioritising localisation has led to significant transformation around gender equality. 'Often what people label as gender work is not only about women; it is about the planet, about democracy. The transformations we have witnessed are profound, reaching far beyond us as women. Feminist activism may be led by women, but it has never been only about us. It has always been about society as a whole,' she says.

***Feminist activism may be led by women,** but it has never been only about us.*

According to her, shifting power and decision-making cannot take place without shifting resources. 'It is not just about financial resources. What we need is a shift in narrative and approach around trust. When we talk about shifting power, the assumption is that power is somewhere else and is benevolently handed over.

'We ask many questions about what people can learn. One of the things we need to do is 'unlearn' the idea that power is centralised in the Global North, and that we have to be kind enough to shift it somewhere else. The sector urgently needs to unlearn this bias,' advises Moudouthe.

Editor's note: At the time of publication, Saranel Benjamin had taken up a new position outside Mama Cash. She contributed to this story while serving as Co-Executive Director.

Leading from the South (*LFS*)

Leading from the South (*LFS*) is an alliance of four feminist funds from Africa, Asia, and Latin America committed to advancing gender justice across the Global South. It resources and facilitates collective action led by women, girls, and gender-diverse people to transform societies.

LFS is a unique and vital part of the global (gender equality-related) funding ecosystem. Since 2016, its four members—the African Women's Development Fund (*AWDF*), International Indigenous Women's Forum-AYNI Fund (*FIMI*), Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (*FMS*), and Women's Fund Asia (*WFA*)—have formed the first and only consortium of women's funds entirely led by women from the Global South. *LFS* has supported over one thousand organisations and networks across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and globally, working at local, national, regional, and global levels, often in challenging contexts. As an intersectional resourcing consortium, *LFS* engages on issues including *GBV*, *SRHR*, climate, and economic justice, recognising their interconnected impact on the communities it serves.

Localising through collaborations

Text: Elizabeth Kameo

Is localisation truly possible? Can local actors take the lead in identifying and addressing the issues that affect their communities? Shereen Essof, Executive Director of JASS (Just Associates), and Anuradha Chatterji, Executive Director of CREA, share how partner organisations, within the Count Me In! (CMI!) consortium, are enabling local actors to drive change among structurally excluded communities through strategic resourcing, movement-building support, and dedicated advocacy spaces.

'The key element is time: investing in alliances and accepting that conflict and compromise are part of the work.'

In the mid-2000s, Malawian women living with HIV/AIDS (WLWHIV) faced severe stigma and discrimination. Three organisations came together to form a partnership that empowered these women to take the lead in transforming their own lives and their communities.

As part of the CMI! movement strategy, JASS supported this organising process, which grew into a movement of more than nine thousand women campaigning for better access to antiretroviral treatment.

'In 2005 and 2006, in Malawi, no one spoke about the impact of HIV on women. So JASS partnered with ActionAid and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) to strengthen the organising power of rural Malawian women, so they could lead the change needed to live with dignity,' says Shereen Essof, Executive Director of JASS.

According to Essof, the partnership created spaces where women could share their experiences, build confidence, and take the lead in driving the change they envisioned.

'Through open discussions, the women built trust and confidence, laying the groundwork for what we call transformative power; the belief that I matter, I belong, and that by working with others, I can make change happen,' she explains.

'By 2010, these efforts had brought together sixty women leaders from three provinces in Malawi and mobilised more than a thousand women. They forged alliances with unions, the Ministry of Health, and both Christian and Muslim leaders.

By 20122 013, their organising led to a policy victory, driven by HIV-positive women advocating for improved drug regimens,' she points out.

At a time when 'localisation' was not yet a buzzword in the development sector, this initiative stood as a clear example of locally led change.

'Localisation is beneficial because it allows local actors to address the challenges in their communities—hey understand their needs best. Instead of working top-down, you work bottom-up,' says Anuradha Chatterji, Executive Director of CREA.

She adds, 'It also enables organisations to pinpoint problems accurately and respond with collective, contextually relevant solutions.'

One example of successful localisation within CMI! is the South Asia Sex Workers Summit, organised by CREA in May 2024 in Kathmandu, Nepal. The summit brought together more than

two hundred sex workers from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, alongside allies.

It resulted in the Kathmandu Declaration, which calls for the protection of sex workers' rights and tackling systemic exclusion. 'CREA is not a sex worker-led organisation, but after working with sex workers for more than two decades, they consider us an ally.

'The Kathmandu summit highlights CREA's role in movement building and in equipping structurally excluded groups—LGBT people, sex workers, young women and girls, and people living with disabilities—with information, knowledge, and capacity-building support so they can lead change,' says Chatterji.

According to her, successful localisation requires shifting power and adopting a bottom-up approach, while ensuring communities have the tools and resources to lead. Essof agrees, noting that evidence shows localisation is possible, but not through a top-down approach.

'Localisation means shifting power dynamics in more equitable ways. It demands changes in traditional methods and mindsets about who acts and how they act. It can be complex and challenging, requiring significant adjustments in approach and perspective,' she explains.

Within the consortium, members work to achieve this by transferring power and fostering inclusive participation. 'Sustainable change is more likely when diverse groups are engaged and empowered, rather than relying solely on top-down approaches that have often proven ineffective. That is why the consortium addresses power dynamics at its core,' Essof explains.

Each organisation brings unique strengths that, when combined, drive locally led change toward a shared goal. 'It was no accident that CMI! emerged between 2010 and 2012. Many of these organisations were led by people who knew and trusted each other.

'Then, as now, it was critical for like-minded organisations to join forces, pooling their strengths in a resource-limited context to achieve greater impact,' she adds. Both Executive Directors stress that collaboration is not only essential for successful localisation but also for the valuable lessons it brings.

Because contexts and partners change, it is important to listen, build trust, respond to their needs, give them the power to make change, and remain open to changing ourselves. Collaboration, Chatterji says, is a lesson in flexibility, adaptability, and staying connected with partners.

Essof adds that one critical lesson is recognising that shifting attitudes and norms is never easy—and there are no quick solutions. 'The key element is time: investing in alliances and accepting that conflict and compromise are part of the work.

Photos: South Asia Sex Workers Summit

'Shrinking space for activism in the USA is not surprising; it happened in Uganda decades ago.'

'The '*Our Bodies, Our Lives*' campaign in Malawi began in 2006 and continues to evolve in 2025. This shows that meaningful change demands a long-term perspective. The development aid industry often seeks quick fixes, but those approaches rarely work,' she explains.'

As CMI! members work to ensure local actors lead change in their communities, they must also contend with shrinking civic space—areas outside government control where people organise for collective wellbeing—which is increasingly restricted in many parts of the world.

'The language of 'closing civic space' really means increased repression, since space does not close by itself. With rising repression, we must be more creative and prioritise safety when creating spaces,' says Essof.

'Shrinking space for activism in the USA is not surprising; it happened in Uganda decades ago. But CMI! and women's rights organisations have long experience working in hostile environments, making us skilled at adapting and staying agile under repression.'

For Chatterji, shrinking civic space raises a fundamental question: 'How do we work with the resources available, and what issues must we address to ensure our gains remain relevant? Shrinking civic space in India and Pakistan, the anti-LGBT law in Uganda—this is not business as usual. Yes, resources are shrinking, and we knew this could happen,' she explains.

She continues: 'We need to strengthen voices and capacities for change, secure the resources to keep our work going, connect partners with funders, and train them in resource mobilisation—while holding the line. This change is permanent, but we can continue to adapt, and no one can take that away.'

Thanks to CMI!'s collaborative, bottom-up approach, communities are now better equipped to adjust and carry on their work in shifting contexts.

'From a movement-building perspective, once people have the tools, the awareness to recognise power and develop strategies to hold it accountable, the confidence and self-determination, and the understanding that they are stronger together—they will keep working and creating change,' says Essof.

She adds that agility and resilience are essential for meeting challenges in an ever-changing environment. 'Overcoming challenges calls for agility, resilience, and strategic shifts. We must adapt to change while keeping people safe and continuing to work in resource-depleted contexts,' she says.

'Ten years ago, the challenges were different. But the consortium's infrastructure has enabled us to build relationships, trust, and understanding—allowing us to think creatively, navigate obstacles, find solutions, and expand our reach.' Despite these hurdles, Essof and Chatterji agree that preserving the progress achieved so far is essential.

'Today, there is a growing wave of conservatism, authoritarianism, and right-leaning movements in many countries. CMI! envisions a world that is gender-equal and just, where women, non-binary, gender non-conforming, trans, and intersex individuals can fully enjoy their rights,' says Essof.

'Achieving this vision will mean holding on to our goals while adapting our strategies to uphold our principles. Safeguarding the progress we have made will be just as important as pushing for new gains.'

CREA and JASS are two CMI! member organisations working on the ground in the Global South to build and strengthen movements within local communities.

Through its strategies (money, movements and making change), CMI! ensures that women's rights organisations and defenders have the financial resources they need to carry out their activism and equips them with tools and spaces to craft their own strategies.

About CMI!

Active since 2016, Count Me In! (CMI!) is a global consortium of eight organisations working across twenty-six countries. It brings together feminist funds and movement-support organisations from both the Global North and South.

Since its inception, the consortium has engaged twenty-five thousand women's rights organisations and twenty thousand activists, contributing to two thousand eight hundred changes in laws, norms, and policies.

A Day with a Community Health Promoter

Before the sun is fully up, Syprose Achola Aduda is already on her feet, medical kit in hand, moving from home to home in her village. Her day will be long, unpredictable, and filled with emergencies, yet she meets it with a warm smile. This is the world of a community health promoter—relentless, compassionate, and transformative.

by Nicera Kimani

Have you ever wondered what a typical day looks like for a community health promoter in a developing country? What fills their hours as they serve remote, underserved communities? What keeps them inspired and committed to their work? And how does their role compare to that of other health professionals?

In search of answers, and to catch a glimpse into the world of a community health worker, I travelled to Victoria Friendly Montessori in Kamasangre West, Suba North, on Rusinga Island, Homabay County, a place that always feels like home to me.

Usually, I take a direct bus, but this time I chose to experience part of my journey by water bus. As the boat glides over the calm, sparkling waters of Lake Victoria, the breeze brushes gently across my face, and the view is breathtaking.

Lush green hills rise from the shoreline, dotted with homesteads, as fishermen in canoes cast their nets under the golden morning sun. There is a peaceful rhythm to island life that draws you in. My mission on this trip is simple: to step into the shoes of those who wake up each morning with a mission larger than themselves.

Victoria Friendly Montessori (*VFM*) is a community-based organisation that provides a peaceful and inspiring learning environment for young children. 'It has been operating in the area since 2005,' explains Philip Ongeri, the Project Manager of *VFM*.

'Initially, we focused on projects supporting orphans and vulnerable children affected by the high prevalence of *HIV/AIDS* among adults. Many children had lost one or both parents and were being raised by mothers, grandmothers, or other relatives.

'At the time, there was no school in the area where children could access basic education, despite a population of around six thousand people. We decided to start Victoria Friendly Montessori School to bridge this gap,' he says.

> ***'You see, this work we do is not just about skills, it is about heart.'***

When the children first began attending school, it quickly became apparent that many arrived without food, and some were already malnourished. This prompted the introduction of a school feeding programme, ensuring that pupils received two meals each day; breakfast and lunch.

As the programme grew, *VFM* expanded its vision and developed five thematic areas: Health, Economic Empowerment, Education, Water, and Sanitation. This holistic approach was designed to benefit the wider community, with a particular focus on women and school-going children. To make these initiatives both sustainable and effective, *VFM* works closely with Community Health Promoters, who play a central role in bringing the projects to life.

I arrive at Waembe Cluster, at Syprose's house, at half past eight in the morning and find her already deep into her work. Neatly dressed in her uniform, she stands beside a well-organised toolkit stocked with weighing scales, testing equipment, gloves, and other essentials.

She is advising a young woman holding her child, looking every bit like a doctor in action. Despite being in the middle of her work, Syprose Achola Aduda greets me with a warm, ever-present smile. From a distance, it is easy to see the pride and passion she carries.

She pulls out a chair for me and says warmly, 'Feel welcome, my daughter.' The introductions are light-hearted and full of laughter. 'I am a widow, a mother, and a proud Community Health Worker,' she says, her smile radiating quiet strength.

'You see, this work we do is not just about skills, it is about heart,' she says with quiet conviction. 'You must be part of your community. If you do not love the community, then you do not deserve to be a community health worker.'

Syprose tells me she has a full day ahead, with several households to visit, but first, she takes me back to the early days of her journey. She recalls earning a stipend of just 2,500 shillings a month while serving as a Community Health Promoter under the County Government.

Life, she admits, was tough. Things began to shift when she got the opportunity to volunteer at Victoria Friendly Montessori, a turning point that brought her work new meaning. We set off to the next household. The walk is longer than I expected, but it allows our conversation to flow more deeply.

She tells me that most mornings start in a rush, as she often has to respond to emergencies. Today, with no urgent calls, she has the rare chance to check in on her neighbours before visiting the rest of the households on her list.

It is in this moment, as we walk, that I begin to understand how demanding her work truly is. Being a community health promoter in a rural area requires a wide range of skills, an endless supply of patience, and a deep well of passion.

We arrive at the home of a young expectant mother. I introduce myself, then step aside to give them privacy as they go inside for a medical check. A short while later, they join me for a conversation. Syprose gently explains that the young woman requires regular check-ups and must visit the clinic every month.

From her stories, I learn that Syprose wears many hats in her community, not just as a social worker, but as a nutritionist, assistant nurse, public health promoter, and trusted advisor. Officially, she is recognised as a Community Health Promoter, working closely with Victoria Friendly

Montessori and nearby health facilities.

Yet even this title hardly captures the breadth of her influence. With visible pride, she lists the five pillars of *VFM*: Health, Economic Empowerment, Education, Water, and Sanitation—explaining how these have brought lasting change to the community.

She and her fellow community health workers champion simple but life-saving practices: airing utensils after washing rather than stacking them, washing hands after using the latrine, and hanging clothes on lines instead of spreading them on the ground, where harmful insects lurk.

As we walk, I notice how the community responds to her. Children call out her name, women wave from their compounds, and some stop to chat briefly. Syprose is not just known here, she is deeply trusted, almost a local celebrity. Several residents even approach her to share concerns or updates, as though she is a bridge between them and the larger world.

Curious about how these health workers manage to sustain their efforts, I ask her. She explains that each maintains a kitchen garden, providing a steady supply of vegetables for their families.

As part of their training at *VFM*, they learned agriculture and entrepreneurship skills, which they are encouraged to put into practice. In addition, they receive a modest stipend to support their work—a small but meaningful acknowledgement of their contribution.

I find myself wondering aloud how her role compares to that of a professional social worker. Syprose pauses thoughtfully before responding. What sets her apart, she explains, is that she is part of the very community she serves. Her deep knowledge of the context gives her an advantage. She speaks the local language, understands the culture, and shares a similar way of life.

'Professionals may come from outside the community,' she says. 'Some are doctors or people from a higher social class, which can intimidate residents. They might feel shy or expect such professionals to keep to their circles. But when the health worker is one of them, they open up easily.'

We continue to two more households, and by now I am starting to feel the weight of the day. My legs ache, and I silently wish to head back. But for Syprose, the work is just hitting its stride. In each home, she moves with calm efficiency, checking patients, spotting signs of illness, writing referrals, and giving clear instructions for hospital visits.

By the time we finish, we have visited five households. Syprose tells me this is a typical day for a Community Health Promoter. There is no neat nine-to-five routine. Some days she gets home late; on others, she may be called in the middle of the night to respond to an emergency. For her, service has no closing hours.
When I ask if she ever gets time to rest, Syprose smiles softly. Being a community health promoter, she explains, is more of a calling than a career pursued for financial gain. It is demanding, yes, but deeply fulfilling.

The greatest reward, she says, is witnessing a mother deliver safely, both mother and child healthy, or seeing an elderly neighbour properly fed and cared for. Those moments, she confides, make all the challenges worthwhile.

Harrie Oostrom, one of the co-founders of Victoria Friendly Montessori, shares this sentiment. He believes community health workers have a unique advantage over professionals.

Unlike doctors or nurses who may be posted to an area for a short period, often unfamiliar with the culture or daily struggles of the community, these workers are rooted in the very places they serve.

Harrie also raises an important point about sustainability. Community health workers remain long after projects end or external partners move on, continuing to walk alongside their neighbours with quiet dedication. Professionals may bring expertise, but community health workers bring constancy.

To Harrie, the relationship between professionals and community health workers is complementary; each brings a different kind of expertise. But when it comes to engaging the community and ensuring lasting change, he is clear: community health workers come first.

And after spending the day with Syprose, I understand why. Her life is busy, demanding, and often exhausting—but it is also profoundly meaningful. Community health workers are the sparks that ignite transformation; the stewards who keep the flame alive long after others have left. In many ways, they are the heartbeat of community development.

From fear to sisterhood

Text and images by Hester Francken

Once divided by fear, local women in Bidibidi refugee settlement now lead together; building businesses, restoring dignity, and shaping their future from the ground up. Under mango trees and in modest church halls, they organise, speak out, and support one another. Their story reveals a simple truth: real leadership starts when people are trusted to lead their own way. It grows slowly, steadily—from within.

Shida (left) and Rehema share a moment of laughter with their children.

'They warned us: the animals from South Sudan are coming— he killers! Hide your children!' Under a tree in Bidibidi, Uganda's largest refugee settlement, local women burst into laughter at the memory of these once-feared warnings. 'Back then, we had our prejudices. We were scared of them!' admits one, gently touching her South Sudanese neighbour's forearm. 'Who were these strangers? Why should they live on our land while we struggle to survive?'

Now, warmth has replaced those early suspicions. 'Soon enough, they started sharing beans they received from aid organisations. I thought to myself: *next time, it could be us fleeing war. We must care for each other*. So, we gave them our mangoes. And then it hit me: they were not animals, they were just like us,' shares a Ugandan woman, as the South Sudanese women join in laughter.

Sida shares her journey, 'Nine years ago, we fled the killings in South Sudan. As children, we had also heard terrible stories about Uganda; brutal killings during their civil war. But I believed that if I did good, people would respond in kind. I told myself: *I want just one friend*. I shared water, soap, learned their language, and welcomed them in. Today, we are colleagues; they have become my sisters.'

In the background, a vibrant local band rehearses, filling the air with rhythm and colour. Had my colleague and I not signed our names in a registration book or heard these stories, we might never have realised we were inside a refugee settlement. There are no fences here; it looks and feels like any other warm, welcoming village.

Bidibidi, in northern Uganda, has been home to around 285,000 refugees since 2016p— eople forced to flee South Sudan's brutal war. They arrived from the north, escaping trauma and loss. We came from the south, from Kampala—thirteen hours by bus over pothole-ridden roads, past elephants and endless mango trees, through rolling green hills, across the roaring Nile, and into villages alive with colour and movement.

We first stopped in a village bordering Bidibidi, with red dusty paths and mangoes literally falling into your path. The hospitality was unmatched, even in a country already known for its warmth.

Each step I took near the round, carefully kept huts brought a new invitation to sit under the shade and have a chat. Here, the Aringa and Kakwa communities live side by side with integrated South Sudanese families.

One such family is Simon's. He told me how they sometimes still visit relatives inside the settlement, though his own family is now fully integrated. 'We feel at home here in Uganda,' he said. The serenity on the faces of Simon, his wife Anastacia, and their two children, both born here, is unmistakable as they wave us off.

As we finally drive into Bidibidi's Area 2, we are greeted by the biggest smiles I have ever seen. After months in Uganda, I am certain that Ugandan women have the broadest, most generous smiles in the worlda— nd then Sida appears, her smile radiant, her presence magnetic. She will be our guide during two dialogues with women's groups. Her natural warmth and natural leadership radiate.

We step into a small clay church with a tiny altar and a set of traditional drums tucked in one corner. Women sit in three neat rows. Sida invites a woman from the host community to open with a prayer.

Arabic, English, and Kakwa ripple through the room as introductions begin. South Sudanese or Ugandan, Christian or Muslim, there is no divide. Though many faces show signs of exhaustion, they glow with resilience and purpose.

Every week, these women make and sell soap, manage small savings groups, and confront the everyday pressures of life: dwindling food rations, firewood shortages, school fees, and fragile incomes. One woman puts it plainly:

'We run businesses, but selling is hard here. Sometimes, organisations offer skills training. But no one ever asks: What do you want to do? What are your talents? How can you contribute? When I asked to be a tailor, they trained me as a hairdresser. But that gives me no energy. It is not me.'

In the early days, tensions ran high between refugees and host communities, especially over firewood. Much of it stemmed from miscommunication, worsened by language barriers. But it was women who stepped forward,

But it was women who stepped forward, forming small groups to build trust and mutual understanding across the divide.

Shida, a South Sudanese community leader living in Bidibidi, Uganda

forming small groups to build trust and mutual understanding across the divide.

Still, danger lingers. Women from both communities face exploitation as they try to support their families. 'Need firewood? Pay me, and then sex follows.' 'Want your rented land back? First, sex.'

Rape is reported. Some landlords abuse their power over refugee tenants, demanding sex or stealing crops. Young boys, often under the influence of drugs, lash out, blaming refugees when tensions rise. And yet, despite carrying these heavy burdens, the women persist.

'We tell our children stories on how to be good,' one woman says. But their work goes far beyond stories. They organise, support each other, and raise their voices to community leaders. In Bidibidi, sixty percent of households are led by women.

'We are stressed and worn out,' one woman confesses. Still, their voices are too often ignored. 'We are all human beings. We are one! We should all talk together,' they insist. They listen deeply to one another, voicing anger without fear and lifting each other with respect, resolve, and remarkable grace. And through it all, they laugh unrestrainedly.

It is striking: those once seen as 'dangerous strangers' are now sisters, co-creators of their families' futures through relentless daily effort. I sit quietly with my colleague and two men from a local organisation. Like me, they listen in awe.

These women are not just surviving; they are building community, resilience, and dignity. Yet, despite their deep insight and lived experience, they are too often overlooked. Their leadership, if recognised and supported, could unlock lasting and meaningful change.

This is exactly the vision behind LEAD, a joint initiative by Woord en Daad and its local partners: to support communities in living together with dignity and shaping development based on their needs. In places where durable solutions for refugees remain distant, they recognised that real progress begins with local ownership.

But it requires moving beyond traditional aid models, where donors set the agenda, local organisations implement, and communities are expected to receive passively. That top-down chain has not only failed to deliver lasting impact; it has sometimes done real harm. While it may produce quick results, many local actors point to unintended consequences and a development approach that too often fades once the funding ends.

Take, for example, a well-funded programme aimed at preventing teen pregnancies. It backfired when some girls began intentionally getting pregnant, not out of ignorance, but because it granted them access to the project's resources. In another case, a donor tried to improve education by constructing school buildings. But here, teaching under trees is the norm, and the new buildings went unused. 'Very convenient to shelter our cows!' locals joked when I asked what had become of the classrooms.

Years ago, LEAD's partners—local actors, Woord en Daad, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs—asked a deceptively simple question: *How do we sustainably enable local ownership, so communities and local organisations can make decisions that truly serve those who live here?* That question sparked a fundamental shift in mindset, roles, and relationships.

In Kampala, we visited Harriet Mbabazi at Woord en Daad's office, which they share with a national beekeepers' umbrella organisation. Mbabazi is more than just pragmatic and well-connected—she is a deeply relational force. A spider in the web, she intuitively understands what different actors need.

She builds trust with local governments, connects with grassroots communities, and weaves learning across diverse partners. Together with colleagues like Wendy van Amerongen and Arnout de Visser, she has helped reimagine how development work gets done—from a top-down model of delivery to one grounded in trust, collaboration, and local autonomy.

Local organisations were involved as equal partners from the very start, shaping the programme's design, contributing to the budget, and participating fully in decision-making. 'It was not easy,' recalls Wendy van Amerongen.

'We work with twelve local partners, each unique in size and capacity. But we prayed, danced, and sang together, connecting as people first, before diving into formal structures. That is where the trust began.'

From there, roles began to shift. 'If we want true partnership—where supply follows demand, decisions are made on the ground, and funding becomes sustainable—then those of us in the West must learn to step back,' she says.

Realistically, Van Amerongen notes that Woord en Daad's ability to adapt is helped by its structure: seventy percent of its funding comes from private sources, and the organisation has already undergone a major shift toward becoming a project-based learning organisation.

She speaks candidly about her own evolving role. 'I do not know exactly what my role will look like in the future,' she admits. 'Right now, it is about facilitating our partners' capacity and stepping in only when they ask for my expertise. And honestly, I hope that one day, support like mine will not be needed in the same way—that we will relate to each other as true equals.'

For Van Amerongen, learning is not a one-way street. 'There is so much we can adopt from how our partners collaborate and innovate. It all comes down to conscious listening and entering into real dialogue.'

In many ways, this mindset shift is the most radical part of LEAD—not just for the programme, but as a signal for what the future of development could, and perhaps must, become.

For local partners like Catherine Naisu, director of the Hamiza Development Foundation—which focuses on women and households—the difference was immediate and profound. 'We were used to donor programmes where everything was predetermined. The donor would come on their 'fault-finding missions'—boss at the top, servant at the bottom. That created fear and resentment.'

It is striking: those once seen as 'dangerous strangers' are now sisters, co-creators of their families' futures through relentless daily effort.

Rehema, a host-community member who stood up for refugee women

LEAD **was different. From the outset, her** organisation was invited in as a co-designer. 'This time, the activities were ours,' Naisu says. 'Within clear guidelines, we are given freedom, coaching, and the flexibility to adapt. We feel trusted to use our expertise to meet the real needs of our communities.'

Crucially, that trust also extends to how funds are managed. 'We can now allocate resources based on what is actually needed on the ground,' she explains. 'And when something is not working, we do not have to hide it.

We say, *'This is not working; can we find a solution together?'* She highlights how Woord en Daad's door is always open, a sign of genuine commitment—not just to local ownership, but to the growth of organisations.

What also sets LEAD apart, Naisu points out, is how intentionally it taps into existing networks; strengthening relationships across all levels, from ministries to district and settlement leaders. 'The local government is now engaged co-creatively at every step, which fosters a real sense of responsibility to deliver the services our communities need.'

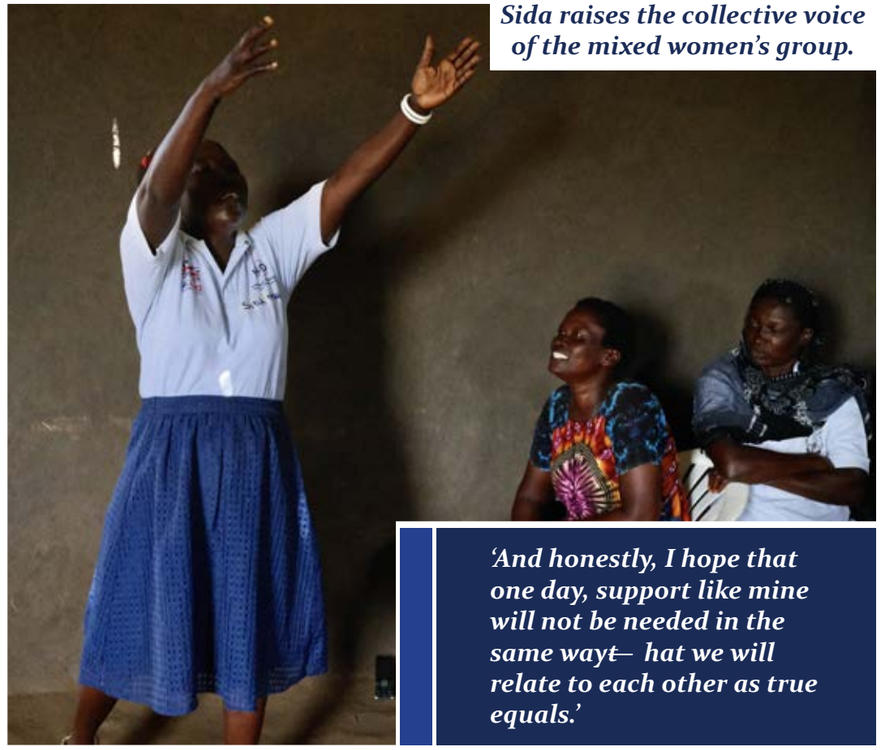
Taban Rashid, programme manager at Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI), echoes that sentiment. 'There is real freedom here for local refugee organisations to think outside the box,' he says. 'We are not just reacting to pre-defined frameworks. We helped design this project ourselves, grounded in our own context.'

That co-creation process, through collaborative workshops that brought all partners to the table, has had a transformative effect. 'We get space to understand each other, not just through documents, but as people working within the same system,' Rashid explains. 'Our efforts are more sustainable—not because someone told us what to do, but because our quality and confidence are growing.'

This newfound empowerment also comes with real pressure. At CECI, the weight of high expectations is keenly felt, from the Office of the Prime Minister, UNHCR, and the local communities.

'They expect quick results: resilience built, livelihoods improved. But that raises tough questions about what is realistically possible within a given timeframe, and how to remain accountable. Therefore, we make it clear what the project can deliver, and equally, what it cannot,' he explains.

Ugandan and South Sudanese women in a savings group meet with local NGO CECI.



Sida raises the collective voice of the mixed women's group.

'And honestly, I hope that one day, support like mine will not be needed in the same way—that we will relate to each other as true equals.'

Hamiza, too, is navigating the complexity. Political instability can easily distort or misuse the approach. 'LEAD offers freedom and trust. While we are learning to embrace that, not all donors are ready to work this way,' she warns.

A further hurdle is financial sustainability. Local governments often lack the budgets needed to build on community efforts, such as supporting trained farmers to grow beyond subsistence.

Despite these tensions, a deeper shift is undeniably underway. As CECI and Hamiza's experiences show, local organisations are no longer operating from the sidelines. They are stepping into roles of genuine influence and responsibility, shaping the future of development in their communities.

Back at Woord en Daad's office in the Netherlands, there is cautious optimism. The mindset shift is now taking root in daily practice. For years, they have worked through local partners, offered long-term funding, and supported multi-year programmes. But now, they are realising that real change does not just lie in structures or timelines. It happens when behaviours shift.

'We have to ask ourselves daily: when do we step in and when do we hold back? That is not always easy,' says Van Amerongen. It requires unlearning ingrained habits. 'No more, *I will just quickly write that proposal because it is easier*,' she says. 'We need to start by asking: *How would you approach this? What do you want to learn?*'

When an annual field trip came up, she thought carefully about whether to join, and then told her partners, 'I do not think that is necessary.' It was not just symbolic; it was a signal of trust. This behaviour change is also visible on the ground. Local organisations now openly share what is not working, co-create solutions, and engage in policy dialogue with governments. 'Because we feel empowered,' says Naisu.

'At the grassroots level, we see movement the moment people understand their rights and feel a mandate,' Van Amerongen adds. 'When people begin to believe: *I can lead. I have a say.*' She puts it: 'Local actors have planted their own seeds. Once they harvest and taste the fruits, that is when the real blooming begins.'

We are only beginning to find out. But already, the signs are unmistakable. Local actors are stepping forward, not because they have been told to, but because they feel they can. They are adapting quickly, responding to real needs, and taking ownership rooted in their lived realities.

And in the communities themselves? Sida puts it plainly: 'Normally, international NGOs would come with cookies and soda. Of course, we came—free food for our children! But involvement? No. We were told what to do.'

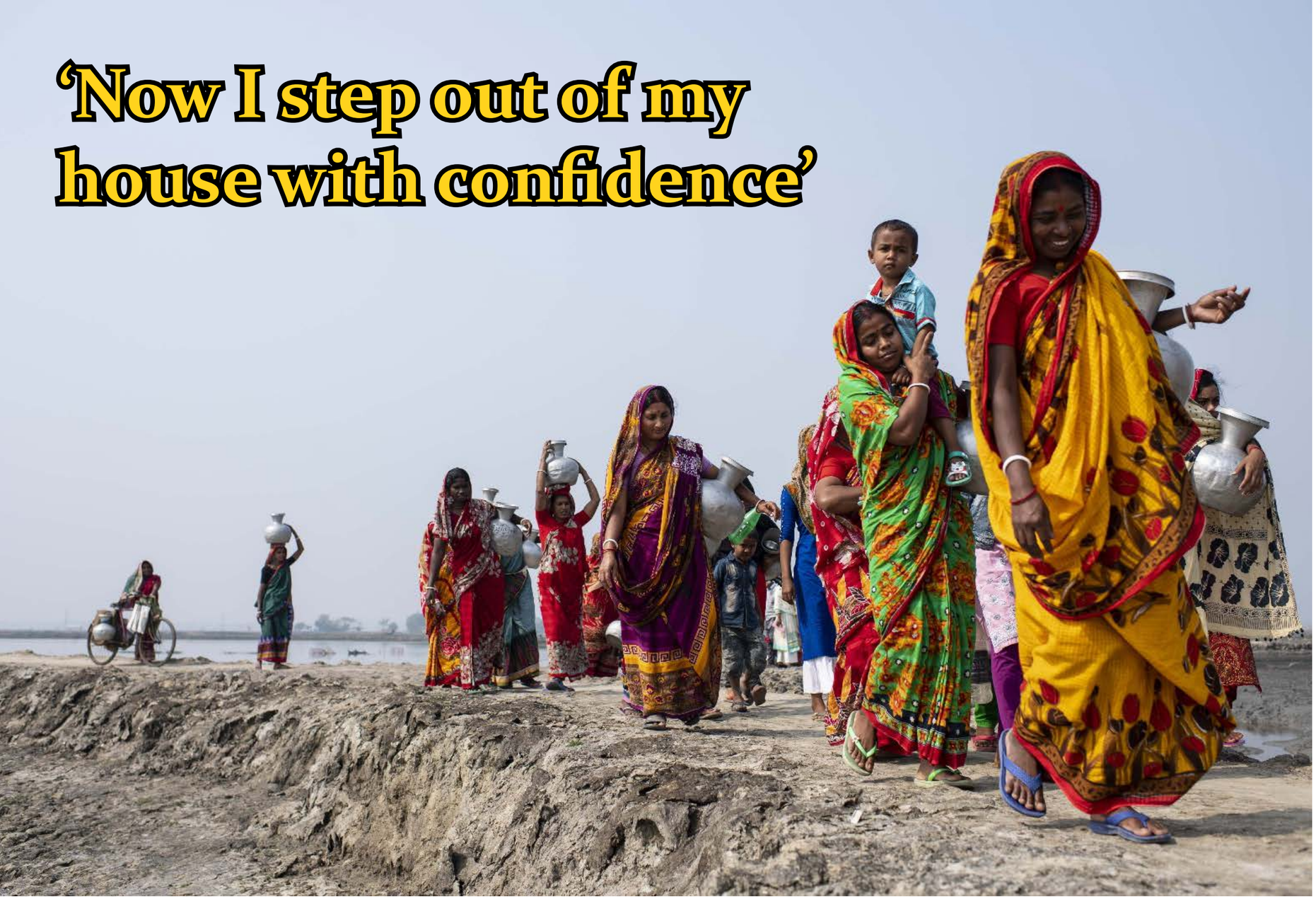
Now, local initiatives look different, no cookies or soda, and fewer people come. 'But those who do, come because they are genuinely interested. Because now we are listened to. We feel we have a say.'

In Bidibidi, leadership does not descend from above. It grows slowly, steadily—under mango trees, among women who once feared each other and now call each other sisters. And when their voices are heard, sustainable change begins.

As one refugee put it, 'For the first time, I felt I am not just a beneficiary—I am part of the solution.' For NGOs and donors beginning this journey, the lesson is simple and profound: leadership does not start with strategies or funding models.

It begins with trust. And while the world is still learning how to nurture that trust, in places like Bidibidi, the seeds have already been sown, promising a future shaped not by outsiders, but by the people and organisations who know their communities best.

‘Now I step out of my house with confidence’



Women from Sathkira district fetch water, photo: Oscar Seijkens

Women bear the brunt of climate change, which is why they must be at the forefront of adaptation efforts. The Water Justice Fund is one of the first initiatives to channel climate adaptation funding directly into the hands of women. ‘Locally led adaptation does not mean communities work in isolation. They get input from elsewhere—but they lead the process themselves.’

by Joris Tielens

Last year, two women’s groups representing fifty households in the village of Khorerdanga, located in the coastal region of Southern Bangladesh, came together to tackle a pressing issue. Their community lives on reclaimed land protected by polders, but these polders were flooding because the drainage canals had become clogged with sediment from the tidal rivers they feed into.

‘The women organised themselves and made this issue a priority. They wrote a proposal on their own and successfully persuaded the local Water Development Board to contribute sixteen thousand euros for canal excavation,’ says Hassan Rafath of the grassroots organisation Uttaran, which works closely with communities living on poldered land.

The women not only contributed funds themselves but also took part in the physical labour of digging out the canal. ‘The local government was surprised by their capacity—t— he work was completed in just five days,’ he notes. Their efforts resolved the waterlogging problem for at least a few years, allowing them to reclaim land for gardens and cattle grazing. They are now working toward a more permanent solution.

This canal excavation is a clear example of what the Water Justice Fund makes possible, says Rafath. The fund supports community-led, women-driven solutions to climate challenges. By putting women—who experience these impacts first-hand—in charge, it ensures that adaptation strategies are both effective and grounded in local realities.

‘It puts women in a position where they can make their own decisions,’ he says. ‘Bangladesh is a patriarchal society. In the communities where we work, women have traditionally been dominated by their husbands, fathers, and brothers. But through the Water Justice Fund, women have been able to organise themselves. We work with women-led community groups.’

This focus on women is essential, Rafath explains, because they play a central role in managing water within their households and communities. From fetching drinking water to using it for cooking, cleaning, and agriculture. As a result, they have a unique understanding of local water resources—h— ow scarce or polluted they are, and what is needed to protect them.

‘Our goal is to strengthen the women’s capacity—t— o help them write proposals and improve their advocacy skills.’

At the heart of the Water Justice Fund's approach are locally led adaptation and participatory grant-making. Women's groups identify the most pressing water-related challenges in their communities, decide how to address them, and submit proposals to secure funding. But how can we ensure that everyone's voice is heard? 'When we enter a village, we do not speak with individuals—we engage the entire community,' says Rafath.

The Water Justice Fund facilitates a process where all community members come together to share ideas, discuss priorities, and learn from one another to decide on the best solution. 'There are groups of elders, lower caste members, women, and mena– ll are invited and heard. But within the Water Justice Fund, we intentionally prioritise women,' he explains.

Women's groups begin by discussing their needs and voting on a list of priorities. 'Then they design a solution themselves—sometimes with our help and facilitation,' he says. 'We also support them in writing and typing up proposals to apply for funding.'

These proposals are then reviewed by a peer group comprising local teachers, lawyers, journalists, *NGO* leaders, and women from civil society. Although they know the community well, they are independent, work voluntarily, and bring an outside perspective. The peer group visits the women's groups to hear more about their priorities. Together, they decide which projects receive support from the Water Justice Fund.

The selected projects can address a wide range of water-related and climate adaptation needs—from flood protection and safe drinking water access to improved sanitation, toilets, tube wells, or water storage tanks. Once approved, the women lead the implementation of the projects and take responsibility for ongoing maintenance.

The groups receive support and facilitation from partner organisations within the Water Justice Fund, such as Uttaran in Bangladesh. These organisations provide training, technical guidance, networking opportunities, and advocacy support.

Rafath, who works with Uttaran, emphasises that their role is not to influence the women's decisions. 'We are simply facilitators,' he explains. 'Our goal is to strengthen the women's capacity—to help them write proposals and improve their advocacy skills.'

Uttaran's focus on capacity building and strengthening women's advocacy skills is what makes the approach sustainable, Rafath explains. 'It empowers them to draft and submit proposals to local government independently.

They learn how to present their case and negotiate effectively. This gives communities the confidence to approach ward councillors and request services they are entitled to—such as tube wells or improved sanitation.'

According to Rafath, the impact of these skills extends beyond individual communities because they get to learn from each other. 'The benefits of locally led adaptation are clear,' he clarifies. 'From the very beginning, it is the community that identifies and develops the intervention.

'If their top priority is access to drinking water, for instance, they might decide to excavate a pond themselves. Because the idea is theirs, they feel ownershipa– nd that makes them more committed to maintaining it.'

This approach stands in contrast to top-down interventions imposed by organisations based in Dhaka. 'When decisions are made far from the community, it is likely the solution will not fit,' he explains. 'They might suggest a livelihood activity that simply is not practised locally.'

Decision-making around climate adaptation and resilience is shifting from national and international *NGOs* to the most local level possible, says Vanita Suneja, Programme Lead of the Water Justice Fund. She heads the Fund's secretariat, which coordinates participatory grant-making, fundraising, monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning.

'When we started this, it was quite a thing'

'The great benefit of the locally led adaptation approach used by the Water Justice Fund is that it delivers context-specific solutions,' says Moutushi Sengupta. 'It also creates space for women to come together and engage with other development challengesa– unit where people can learn and build trust. The power of the group is far greater than that of the individual.'

Sengupta has worked in the development sector in India for over thirty years with various organisations and now serves on the advisory board of the Water Justice Fund, helping guide its strategy and learning.

'As a group of feminist leaders from different parts of the world, we are working to contribute to the success of participatory grant-making and realise the concept of putting women in communities in charge. When we first introduced this in the development sector, it was quite a bold step.'

When it comes to addressing inequity and inequality, Sengupta emphasises that the only effective way is to ensure women from communities have a voice and the power to decide and implement solutions. 'We must also acknowledge the limitations of this approach. It takes significant effort in the initial stages to build the necessary trust. A strong partner on the ground is essential to lay the groundwork and facilitate informed conversations so the work can truly thrive.'

Reflecting this, the Water Justice Fund has introduced movement-building grants alongside its Adaptation grants, which support specific interventions. 'Through these grants, we aim to unite like-minded women and help them amplify their message across the wider ecosystem.'

Advocacy and information sharing are key to building a movement around locally led development. 'If I have something truly valuable at home but never share it, it is hard for funders, who are often far away, to recognise and support that model,' she explains.

'And we need more donors to be courageous and willing to take risks,' she concludes. 'With a model like this, it takes a leap of faith at the start. We need donors who do not demand solutions or results within just one year, but who trust the processk– nowing that whatever the outcome, it will benefit the community far more than a top-down approach.'

In Satkhira, many water systems are flooded for months, photo: Tareq Mahamud

Launched in 2023 by development organisation Simavi in partnership with three local organisations in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Kenya, the Water Justice Fund has already supported over seventy women-led grassroots initiatives focused on water justice. The long-term goal is for the Fund to operate independently from Simavi by 2030.

'The main advantage of this approach,' says Suneja, 'is that it truly aligns with the actual needs of women on the ground. It values traditional and indigenous knowledge alongside technical standards for climate-resilient water solutions.' Unlike conventional programmes with rigid, pre-set goals, the Water Justice Fund offers flexibility to respond to emerging issues that require immediate action.

While outcomes will vary depending on the local context—since the ideas originate from the women themselves—Suneja highlights that the strength lies in the process. 'The way grassroots women's groups come together to discuss, prioritise, design, and implement solutions is a robust model. It can be adapted and applied across different communities.'

The Fund acts as a catalyst, she explains. In many cases, financing for interventions does not come solely from the Water Justice Fund—local governments also contribute, while the women often invest through money or labour.

In Nepal, for example, local governments co-finance up to fifty percent of community-led projects. In Bangladesh, government subsidies are common, with community members also contributing financially. In Kenya, communities frequently contribute in kind or through volunteer labour.

A key part of the effort, Suneja notes, is strengthening grassroots women's groups. 'Locally led adaptation must involve everyone in the community,' she says. 'That requires creating space for people to listen to one another and learn together. Even someone who might seem unimportant brings their own form of expertise to the table.'

'From the very beginning, it is the community that identifies and develops the intervention.'

Popy from Khorerdanga says: 'I learned how to make my voice heard.', photo: Uttaran

Still, communities do not develop solutions in isolation, she points out. 'Decision-making is locally led, but that does not mean outside knowledge is excluded. Communities learn from each other.' Facilitating *NGOs* or community-based organisations also plays an important role by offering technical guidance and ensuring quality standards are met.

'It is a balanced mix of scientific expertise and indigenous knowledge,' Suneja explains. 'There is interaction and exchange, but the community remains in control. Just because someone introduces a new technology does not mean the community loses its right to decide.'

However, for many participants, this approach is entirely new. 'They are given responsibility for decision-making and managing budgets—often for the first time,' she explains. 'Forming committees, procuring materials, and being accountable for expenditures are all unfamiliar tasks.'

The readiness of women's groups varies, she notes, depending on their existing experience and capacity. 'But what we consistently see is that once they take on these responsibilities, they grow in confidence. They are proud of what they have achieved and eager to share their successes.'

Suneja offers an example from a village in Nepal, where a pipeline extension was needed to improve water access. The women, who had previously relied on hand pumps and were not used to paying for water delivery, were initially hesitant to invest in the new system.

'But through the process, they came to understand that piped water would offer better quality. They also learned how to submit a funding proposal to both the Water Justice Fund and the local government.' Today, they are proud to have secured access to cleaner drinking water.

While the locally led adaptation model may seem new to many communities, *NGOs,* and donors, it is not built from scratch, Suneja stresses. 'We build on decades of participatory approaches.' Communities already have mechanisms for mutual accountability and social auditing—systems where they monitor their own activities and finances.

For instance, in Bangladesh, the women's groups form an implementation committee that manages a bank account and ensures full transparency on every penny received and spent. What sets the Water Justice Fund apart from earlier participatory approaches, Suneja explains, is that the power to choose interventions truly rests with the community. 'This time, the money goes directly into their hands. They handle procurement and project management. They are in control.'

'Decision-making is locally led, but that does not mean outside knowledge is excluded.'

This level of autonomy is still unfamiliar territory for many donors and *NGOs* in the development sector, Suneja adds. 'It is time to think differently—even for international donors—and reflect on how locally led their efforts truly are.

'Are they aligning their resources with the aspirations of the people they aim to support?' She calls for donors to offer flexible, long-term funding if they genuinely want to enable locally led development.

That is why it is crucial to advocate for this approach, Suneja continues. 'We need to show how locally led adaptation can actually work on the ground. And for that, the voices of grassroots women must be heard—their stories need an audience.'

Sharing these lived experiences, she explains, not only helps raise awareness among donors and other communities, but it also deepens understanding of the model itself. 'It is essential to learn from the group processes—how leadership emerges, how negotiations with local government unfold, how conflicts are managed, and how cohesion is maintained. These are the stories that deserve greater attention.'

According to Rafath in Bangladesh, knowledge is the key. He recalls the words of a woman from a small village in the coastal south of the country: 'In the past, we were given money or interventions designed by others.

'But we did not know how to use that money or make sense of the intervention. Now we do. We have learned how to negotiate with the local government chairperson and ask for what we need. When he comes to see us, I step out of my house with confidence. That is the change this has brought.'

Watering seeds of Transformation

Lydia Lepapa demonstrates how they use the token cards.

‘Seeds—one needs to plant them, harvest, and replant so they can benefit.’ Those words, spoken by a resourceful woman in Kajiado, linger like wisdom passed down through generations. Seeds of transformation are being planted in communities across the world—in remote corners and crowded towns alike. Some take root and thrive; others struggle to break the soil. In Kajiado, they are beginning to bloom.

by Nicera Kimani

Change is visible in Kajiado—not just in the land, but in the lives of women who once battled the harshness of drought and scarcity. Their journey captures the essence of resilience and possibility, showing how small steps can grow into powerful change.

This story explores the power of planting seeds that spark change and drive development in social and economic dimensions. To tell it, I travelled across the expansive savanna grasslands that are synonymous with this part of the world.

Beyond the main road linking the county to neighbouring regions, most roads are dusty earthen tracks; only a few short stretches of tarmac appear near urban centres. The landscape is mostly grass, a few shrubs and scattered acacia trees.

Temperatures often reach an average of about 27°C~~h~~ ot and dry, evidenced by parched grass. The undulating plains favour pastoralism as the main economic activity in these parts.

I am deep in Maasai land, home to the Maa people~~t~~ he famous community whose culture has been admired around the world, with their distinctive *shuka* gracing runways in global fashion capitals. They are people who fiercely guard their heritage and remain true to their ways.

Yet, alongside the beauty of the people, culture, and landscape lies a pressing challenge: inadequate water. In some areas, scarcity limits development and can even trigger conflict. Water is not only essential for domestic use but also for agriculture and industry.

Its availability shapes settlement patterns and directly affects the economic well-being of communities. Kajiado, also known for its game parks, has not been spared. The lack of water affects not only households but also wildlife, disrupting the balance of local ecosystems.

To address this, Simavi, through its local partner Neighbours Initiatives Alliance (*NIA*), is implementing the *Water Justice Fund* Programme to ease the burden on the community, with a focus on women.

I am seated under a tree with a group of women adorned in bright Maasai *shuka* and traditional beadwork. I cannot help but admire the colourful beads around their necks and wrists~~t~~ hey look stunning.

We begin with introductions, and as soon as I finish explaining the purpose of my visit, warm smiles spread across their faces. In the past, women had to trek long distances, sometimes up to ten kilometres, just to access water.

Lydia Lepapa, the chairperson of the Naishorua Self-Help Group, explains: ‘We used to walk all the way to Motargwes borehole to fetch water. It is about five to eight kilometres from here.’

‘This took so much of our time, and on some days, we would return home empty-handed because livestock were given priority over women,’ she adds. Sarah Kotene, the eldest among them, recalls a time when women depended entirely on their husbands.

‘We used to wait for our men to bring everything. We could not even plait our hair; instead, we shaved it using razor blades, not barbers. The women you see here built their homes from scratch.

‘When we were young, our mothers taught us how to do it. When it rained and the houses leaked, our men would order us to fix the roofs,’ she says with a soft laugh.

‘I have used cow’s urine several times during my monthly periods because we did not have access to enough water to wash soiled clothes. Cow’s urine cleans and removes dirt; imagine waiting for a cow to urinate so you can wash. After washing, I would use a little water to rinse my leso,’ Sarah explains.

When I turn to the other women and ask if anyone else has done the same, nearly all nod in agreement~~t~~ hey, too, have used cow’s urine at some point. Yet none of these hardships deterred them.

They carried out their gender roles with grace and strength: building homes, fetching firewood, caring for their families, and sustaining their communities. ‘While fetching water, collecting firewood, and doing other chores, we realised we often met along the way. That is when we felt the need to come together as women,’ Lydia recalls.

Lydia Lepapa, the chairperson of the Naishorua Self-Help Group.

We decided to start saving so that we could buy small things for ourselves and stop relying entirely on our husbands. Some women embraced the idea immediately, and that is how our *'merry-go-round'* began. There were twenty of us, and it was during this time that we saw the light—we became stronger.'

Through their savings and small loans, the women began taking up odd jobs, such as tilling land and clearing fields to earn money. This allowed them to start small businesses, pay school fees for their children, and meet other basic needs.

Yet the need for water remained pressing. 'We still needed water close to our community,' Lydia says. One day, the women came across a call for proposals. Because their area is quite remote, *NIA* used posters to reach out to women.

It proved to be the most effective approach, since community *barazas* were largely dominated by men and rarely attended by women. The call was for the *Water Justice Fund* programme which brings women together to share ideas and find solutions around water access and management.

The initiative is implemented in two counties, Kajiado and Makueni. In Kajiado alone, the fund has supported 24 women's groups, each with at least ten percent male membership and three schools. Among these successful groups is the Naishorua Self-Help Group.

Lydia recalls how they were immediately drawn to the opportunity, though at first, they feared the process might be complicated. To their relief, it turned out to be smooth. 'The briefing from Neighbours Initiative Alliance was very helpful,' she says.

With Sarah's help, they drafted their concept note, presented it before a panel, and were later informed that their proposal had been approved. 'That was a dream come true—every coin mattered to us,' Lydia smiles.

The *Water Justice Fund* disburses grants in three stages: sixty percent in the first round, thirty percent in the second, and the remaining ten percent in the final round. The women took the lead in managing every aspect of the project—from managing the budget money to negotiating for quality of materials to ensure efficiency in budget utilization..

Even during the digging of the long trench for the water pipeline, they volunteered their labour. After days of hard work, resilience, and countless negotiations, they finally achieved their goal: water had reached their community.

Recognising their dedication, Neighbours Initiatives Alliance continued to empower the group with training and information to strengthen project management— support extended to other women's groups in the region as well.

Through their savings and the income earned from selling water, the group was able to purchase land and venture into farming. But their ambitions did not stop there. They approached *NIA* once again, this time seeking support to establish a tokenised (automated) water kiosk.

The idea was revolutionary—few would have imagined that rural women could embrace such an innovative solution. This milestone became a catalyst for further transformation.

The women expanded into agriculture, using irrigation to make the most of the water they had long fought for. With ongoing training and mentorship, they began practising modern, climate-smart farming methods.

Today, residents can fetch water around the clock, and the impact goes beyond convenience. Men in the community have begun supporting their wives in fetching water—a notable shift from traditional norms.

Signs of socio-economic empowerment are now evident. Women can braid and plait their hair, something that once seemed out of reach. In the past, they could not afford grooming costs and often resorted to shaving their heads. Some could barely afford even the razors and lived with unkempt hair.

Women can now own a variety of clothing. Before, they had to make do with a single, tough piece of fabric—the *shuka*—which they would wear for more than six months as their only garment.

With access to water and financial empowerment, they now have diverse clothing options and can keep them clean through regular washing. This is a far cry from the days when some had to rely on cow urine to wash clothes stained with menstrual blood.

The water kiosks have bridged a long-standing gap for women who once spent hours trekking long distances to fetch water. With more time on theirhands, many have explored new opportunities and started small businesses.

Most are now engaged in income-generating activities that have improved their livelihoods. The transformation is visible. Many have bought water tanks for their homes, irrigated their farms, and increased their agricultural yields.

With the additional income, some have even purchased land and attained greater financial stability. Once casual labourers on other people's farms, they are now the ones employing extra hands to work on theirs.

Members pay a user fee for the water and purchase tokens that enable them to draw it. While they continue contributing to their respective groups, the water kiosk provides an additional source of income through its management.

The fees collected help cover operational and maintenance costs and ensure the water systems and kiosk's sustainability. At the same time, the initiative sustains the groups themselves by adding to their revenue, which at the end of each year is shared among members as profits or dividends, with a portion set aside for reinvestment.

As we visit various sites, the transformation is visible. The heat and dryness of the climate persist, yet amid the undulating plains lie small oases—patches of green where irrigation is active and farms thrive, thanks to the Water Justice Fundproject implemented by Simavi and the Neighbours Initiatives Alliance.

Families now have access to clean water, thanks to the kiosks established through the partnership between Simavi and Neighbours Initiatives Alliance (*NIA*) Through their efforts, water justice has become a reality for this community.

The automated water kiosk managed by the Naishorua Self-Help Group.

There is, however, a strong need to scale up such initiatives. Kajiado is classified as a semi-arid region, where limited access to water hampers the socio-economic progress of residents.

Women, as primary caregivers, already shoulder multiple responsibilities—constructing homes, collecting firewood, and fetching water for household use. These roles often leave them with little time to pursue education, engage in agriculture, or run businesses.

As shared earlier, many women once walked up to ten kilometres to fetch water. With the introduction of water kiosks, they have reclaimed valuable time and redirected it toward productive ventures such as starting businesses and practising irrigation-based farming.

When scaled up, such projects have the potential to address not only local challenges but also broader global issues, like climate change and youth unemployment.

Water and localisation: Learning in all directions

by Benjamin Loman

From the wetlands of South Africa to Dutch polders, water carries stories of adaptation, learning, and collaboration. In these journeys, knowledge flows both ways: local expertise informs global practices, and shared solutions strengthen communities. Reciprocal partnerships and capacity building are transforming water governance, creating resilient systems rooted in lived realities.

Experts from the Blue Deal Colombia partnership are working together to improve monitoring of the river photo:Blue Deal Colombia

Water transcends borders; it is a theme that connects us worldwide. It brings together villages, regions, countries, people, and flows of knowledge. Precisely for that reason, it is a powerful lens through which to view localisation.

It highlights the shift of aid and expertise from north to south, from 'bringing' knowledge to 'exchanging' knowledge. After all, water management is by definition local. Yet it always touches on global themes such as climate, justice and democracy.

The Netherlands often sees itself as a water country, with its polder model, dykes, and delta works. But in countries where flooding, drought or salinisation are a daily reality, another kind of wisdom lives— hat of living with water instead of against it.

Localisation in the water sector does not mean that the Netherlands becomes less relevant; it means it becomes part of a larger, more reciprocal conversation. A conversation where expertise does not move in a single direction but flows back and forth, like ebb and flow.

And, according to the experts we spoke to, it is exactly in that reciprocity that the future of sustainable water management lies.

For this *Localisation Special,* we spoke with three individuals who have experienced this exchange firsthand in their daily work: Liesbeth Wilschut from the Blue Deal programme (Dutch Water Authorities), Marinus van Dijk from Water Board Vallei en Veluwe (Blue Deal South Africa), and Melvin van der Veen from Both *ENDS.*

Together, they offer three perspectives on what equal cooperation and mutual learning in the water sector can look like— rom policy to practice, and from north to south, and vice versa.

That is the real challenge: not just talking about cooperation, but showing what it delivers.

Liesbeth Wilschut

'Blue Deal is a capacity-building programme. We work in fifteen countries through seventeen partnerships, all built on equality and peer-to-peer cooperation,' says Liesbeth Wilschut from the Blue Deal programme office.

'Local partners determine for themselves what knowledge and support they need. That allows us to align with their context and priorities. The aim is sustainable improvement of water management and water governance— ot by bringing money, but by exchanging knowledge.'

Blue Deal connects Dutch water boards with water boards and river organisations abroad. It is not a classical aid relationship, Wilschut stresses, but a peer-to-peer cooperation without power imbalances.

'A Dutch water board employee works with someone in Ethiopia who does the same job. They speak the same professional language. And because we do not arrive with a bag of money, the usual power dynamics fall away.'

Learning is at the core of the programme; 'in all directions,' as she puts it. 'We facilitate

communities of practice where experts from different countries exchange knowledge on themes such as nature-based solutions and water allocation.

'That is where real conversations arise between professionals who understand each other's realities. Sometimes we organise regional gatherings, but increasingly these networks form organically. You see partners finding each other directly.'

This learning works in two directions. 'In Colombia,' she says, 'we work with partners who put nature-centred thinking first—living with nature instead of building against it. In the Netherlands, we tend to believe strongly in makeability, but with climate change, we are realising that this approach is reaching its limits. From Colombia, we are learning to see water again as a partner.'

Mozambique also shows how local solutions can hold global relevance. 'There they use sand dams—nature-based, cost-efficient structures that retain water in dry areas. They work, and they inspire us, too.

'A Centre of Excellence is even being established there to disseminate knowledge about sand dams. Most of that knowledge now circulates within the country itself, and increasingly from south to north,' she states.

Still, she acknowledges that bringing lessons homea— nd actually applying them—can be improved. 'We have knowledge agendas to anchor lessons from abroad, but in practice, we are not always very good at this. You return from a work visit, dive straight back into dike reinforcement, and almost forget to reflect on what you learned. There is still work to do.'

A new generation is helping to open things up. She continues: 'Within the Blue Deal, we work with the Young Expert Program. In each country, a young professional is involvedp— eople who learn from one another and build networks.

'Six years on, you see that some of them now hold key positions in the water sector. Young people accelerate the learning process because they are open to new ideas and approach things from a different perspective. That may be one of the most valuable outcomes of the programme,' she reveals.

Marinus van Dijk

While Liesbeth highlights the frameworks and structures that enable knowledge exchange, it is in the field where these lessons truly come alive. Marinus van Dijk offers a perspective grounded in local realities, showing how reciprocity and mutual learning unfold.

'I work through the Blue Deal in South Africa,' Marinus van Dijk says, 'in the area of the Blesbokspruit—once a beautiful wetland, now partly overgrown with water hyacinth and suffering from poor water quality.'

'We work there to improve water health and the surrounding living environment, together with local partners. Everything depends on understanding how responsibilities and relationships are organised locally. Who is responsible for what? Where is the money? Who reports to whom? Without that insight, you cannot achieve anything.'

For Van Dijk, working in South Africa is an exercise in letting go. 'If you approach the context through a Dutch lens— 'this is how it should be, this is how we do it at home' —you get stuck. You really have to immerse yourself in the local reality. Things are more hierarchical there. In the Netherlands, you call someone directly; there, that is not self-evident. First, you build the relationship, and only then does the cooperation follow.'

That quickly became his most important lesson. 'I went there thinking: *I am bringing knowledge and expertise. However, I discovered that knowledge is about* thirty percent of what you contribute.

'The real impact comes from connecting—bringing people and organisations together, creating momentum, getting things moving. And being willing to adapt as insights shift or circumstances change. That part is actually fun to experience.'

Sometimes he even brings ideas back to the Netherlands. 'In South Africa, they increasingly use satellite data to monitor water use. They skip an entire step. While we measure and install sensors, they rely on smart data analysis. We can learn from that.'

Their collaboration with the private sector also inspires him. 'At first, we mainly worked with governments and nature managers, but it soon became clear that you cannot get far without entrepreneurs.

'Companies bring knowledge, funding and a results-oriented mindset. That combination

Experts from the Blue Deal Mozambique partnership discussing water quality with a representative of the province photo: Édipo Mirole.

of government, research and businesst— hat 'triangle'—is something we could make much better use of here as well.'

According to Van Dijk, reciprocity is essential. 'We bring knowledge, but we also learn just as much. In South Africa, water is never taken for granted. They understand far better how to deal with scarcityu— sing small dams, basins and smart storage. We could still learn a thing or two about using water more sparingly and consciously.'

His conclusion is clear: 'The Blue Deal is a long-term learning journey for both sides. Building a relationship takes time. We have made many great plans, but in the coming years, we also need to show results on the ground. That is the real challenge: not just talking about cooperation, but showing what it delivers.'

We do not go to other countries to dictate what sustainable water management should look like.

Melvin van der Veen

For Melvin van der Veen, localisation is not a new policy trend but something that has always existed. 'People who face problems and start their own initiativest— hat is localisation. It is deeply human,' he says.

'It is not about carrying out a project somewhere in Kenya with a bag of money, but about strengthening existing initiatives that grow out of local needs.'

Van der Veen works at Both *ENDS,* an organisation that has collaborated for decades with groups close to local communities—people who directly experience the impacts of infrastructure, trade, and climate change.

For him, localisation is rooted in reciprocity: 'We do not go to other countries to dictate what sustainable water management should look like. Often, centuries-old practices are already effective. In an equal partnership, they shape our agenda just as much as we do. Our role is to elevate that knowledge with policymakers here.'

An important example comes from Bangladesh, where Van der Veen works regularly. There, he observed how communities shape the

management of their polder landscapes from the ground up. These areas, originally designed in the 1960s with the best intentions to prevent flooding, are now highly vulnerable to sea-level rise and the impacts of climate change.

'Together with local inhabitants, and with support from engineers and governance specialists, we developed an approach called community-based Tidal River Management,' he explains.

'It is a kind of alternating polder system, similar to what we know in the Netherlands, but grounded in centuries-old practices and local knowledge. This approach restores natural land formation by allowing fertile silt from tidal rivers to settle again on former floodplains.'

Van der Veen sees lessons from these practices for the Netherlands. 'We have lost touch with water, and especially with the decision-making around it. We have voting rights for the water boards, but we hardly know what we are voting on,' he observes.

'Water management is a defining feature of the Netherlands, and it concerns everyone—especially as drought, salinisation, and sea-level rise increase.' He draws inspiration from the countries where he works: 'In Bangladesh or Kenya, people gather under a tree to discuss water and their living environment. That kind of societal conversation, we have lost here.'

According to him, the Netherlands can also learn from new forms of citizen participation emerging elsewhere. 'Deep democracy in South Africa, or citizens' assemblies that grow organically from communities themselves—hat is exactly what we need here. Not only top-down policy, but learning and acting together.'

For him, localisation is ultimately a global movement of mutual learning. 'We can learn technically from the Global South for our climate adaptation—bout saline agriculture in Bangladesh, agroecology in Kenya—ut especially socially.

'How can we talk to each other again, take ownership, and share solutions? Localisation is not just about shifting money or power, but about living together. About learning from one another, all over the world.'

Residents in the polder landscape in the southwestern coastal area of Bangladesh

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‘Listen to those who make it happen’

By Joris Tielens

When local communities take charge of the forests they call home, both the people and the ecosystems benefit. This has become clear through the work of Tropenbos International, which supports locally owned solutions to forest management—especially in situations where the needs of forest dwellers might appear to conflict with conservation efforts.

In Bolivia’s tropical dry forests of Guarayos and Chiquitania, the steady roar of chainsaws might suggest deforestation. But the reality is more nuanced. These sounds often mark community-managed forestry operations, which are helping preserve the forest rather than destroy it.

The Indigenous territories of the Guarayos and Chiquitanos stand as forested islands in a landscape increasingly dominated by cattle ranching and soy farming—two of the major drivers of deforestation. When Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first Indigenous president, took office in 2006, he prioritised land rights for Indigenous communities. As a result, more than twenty million hectares of land—five times the size of the Netherlands—were officially recognised as Indigenous territories.

However, making a living from the forest has long been a challenge for Bolivia’s Indigenous communities. They often lack the capital and equipment needed for large-scale logging operations—like those that drag massive trees between two tractors. At the same time, national forest laws historically prohibited smaller-scale harvesting, effectively sidelining Indigenous people from making use of the forests they stewarded.

That began to change thanks to advocacy efforts by local communities in collaboration with the Instituto Boliviano de Investigación Forestal (IBIF). Together, they pushed for—and succeeded in securing—legal reforms that now allow communities to obtain certification for low-impact logging. Under these new rules, communities are permitted to harvest trees and process them into planks directly in the forest using chainsaw milling.

This method has proved transformative. It triples the income that communities earn from forestry activities and significantly reduces the environmental impact of logging compared to industrial-scale methods.

‘This is one of our successes with locally owned solutions,’ says Nataly Ascarrunz Austin, Executive Director of IBIF, a partner of Tropenbos International. ‘When done in a controlled and certified way, it brings huge economic benefits to the community while also helping to preserve the forest. Forestry can now be a viable economic activity that competes with cattle ranching—the leading cause of deforestation in Bolivia.’

This example illustrates why locally owned solutions are at the core of Tropenbos International’s approach. From their office in Ede, the Netherlands, Anita van der Laan, advisor for Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning at Tropenbos, explains: ‘Locally led initiatives ensure that the support provided aligns with what the communities say they need.

‘As outsiders, we can facilitate the process to help them identify their needs and aspirations—but we cannot design the solutions for them.’ She continues: ‘Such initiatives build on local knowledge, traditions, and lived experience, and ensure community members are involved in every phase—from identifying needs to evaluating outcomes. In other words, ‘nothing about us without us.”

Locally owned solutions significantly boost the chances of lasting success, especially when it comes to innovation, says André Brasser, an expert in collaborative learning associated with Tropenbos International. ‘There are tonnes of studies showing how critical local ownership is. If people are not genuinely engaged, their participation often ends the moment a project does,’ he explains.

‘You need to tailor project interventions to local opportunities and sensitivities. And local people are the ones best placed to lead that

©: IBIF Bolivia

process— hey are the experts in their own context. But that also means adopting a different, and often more complex, approach. That is something we have learned— nd continue to learn.'

The stakes are especially high in the fight against deforestation, Brasser adds. 'There are powerful vested interests— ogging, mining, livestock farming, agro-industrial plantations, infrastructure development. These forces often prioritise profit over preservation. There is big money involved.'

In that context, he argues, it becomes even more urgent to empower and support communities that have a direct stake in keeping forests standing. 'They are the ones who can offer the strongest counterbalance.'

These powerful vested interests are very much present in Bolivia's forests. Soy farming and cattle ranching bring in large profits and are major drivers of deforestation in the country. That is why it is so significant that Indigenous communities now have access to chainsaw milling as part of their approved forest management plans, says Ascarrunz. This shift allows them to generate income in a way that can rival the profitability of cattle ranching.

Previously, forest management was in the hands of large-scale logging companies, which controlled the market and dictated the prices of harvested trees. Indigenous communities had little choice— hey were often forced to lease out their land to commercial soy farmers or take up cattle ranching themselves, clearing forests in the process.

In recent decades, IBIF has collaborated with local communities to develop territorial management plans that promote sustainable forest use. The organisation employs local community members and works to build their capacity in forest management.

IBIF's research has demonstrated that sustainable forestry is achievable when communities are permitted to harvest at small scales and add value to their timber—such as through chainsaw milling.

This evidence played a key role in persuading the government to amend an article in the national forest law. The change allows certified communities to carry out chainsaw milling within legally designated forest areas, as long as their forest management practices are certified.

Instead of extracting entire logs of valuable species, the trees are milled into planks directly on-site. 'This leads to much less ecological damage than the large-scale logging that was common in the past,' says Ascarrunz.

'We place the burden of protecting the forests on them as if they are responsible for saving humanity.'

Another compelling example of locally led development is the prevention of wildfires in the Lomerio region, as shared by Ascarrunz. Wildfires have become an increasing threat due to climate change and prolonged droughts. Farmers and cattle ranchers often use fire to clear land— practice that can quickly spiral into uncontrollable wildfires if not carefully managed.

In response to the devastating fires of 2019, the indigenous government of the Lomerio territory reached out to IBIF for support. Together, they established a technical unit tasked with creating a fire monitoring system. One of the key tools developed was a burn calendar, which outlines safe periods for land clearing and periods when burning is prohibited.

Volunteer community firefighters also play a crucial role. They actively monitor and report potential fire hazards and hotspots. The system they have built is not only functional at the local level— t has been adopted by the National Forest Service, which now uses it as a national standard.

'Indigenous communities, farmers, and cattle ranchers all have a shared interest in preventing wildfires,' says Ascarrunz. 'This common ground brought them together and made success possible.'

'Sometimes indigenous communities are seen as our saviours,' Ascarrunz reflects. 'We expect them to be completely sustainable— ecause we are not. We place the burden of protecting the forests on them as if they are responsible for saving humanity.'

But embracing locally owned solutions, she emphasises, means respecting the right of communities to self-determination— o make their own decisions about how to use their land and resources. 'That may sometimes clash with our objectives,' she says. 'And when it does, you have to be willing to let go of the idea that you have all the answers.'

She recounts how the Lomerio community decided to clear a portion of their forest for agriculture and cattle ranching. 'We could have chosen not to support that plan,' Ascarrunz explains.

'But instead, we worked with them to ensure that the land was used sustainably, through agroecological farming and agroforestry practices. We used to prioritise conservation above all else. Now, people come first. Because strong people make for strong forests.'

'People first—that is what it is about in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as well,' says Charles Mpoyi, Coordinator of Monitoring,

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'Innovation emerges through interaction with outsiders and by learning from one another.'

Evaluation and Learning & Communication at Tropenbos DRC, one of Tropenbos International's key partners. Mpoyi is currently pursuing his PhD in Wageningen, the Netherlands.

'We have worked with twelve communities in Bafwasende, a forested region in the centre of the DRC,' Mpoyi explains. 'Our focus is on supporting them through the long and complex process of obtaining legal recognition of their customary land rights.'

This process begins with formal acknowledgement by local authorities that a group constitutes a traditional forest community with customary rights. Once this is secured, the community can apply for legal land titles under the framework of community forestry.

'These titles are permanent and can cover areas up to fifty thousand hectares,' Mpoyi says. 'Once a community holds legal title, they can use the forest according to a management plan they have created. That includes small-scale agriculture or hunting. However, mining is explicitly prohibited.'

To take charge of their forests, communities must form various committees and draw up a simple management plan outlining how they intend to use the forest. The local forest administration must then approve this plan. Collectively, the twelve communities now manage approximately four hunred thousand hectares of forest— oughly a tenth of the Netherlands' land area.

The motivation to protect these forests runs deep, says Mpoyi. 'The communities have decided to conserve seventy percent of their forest land. They recognise the forest's importance. It provides essential ecosystem services, a source of food through hunting and gathering, and even potential future income through the carbon credit market.

'But more than that, the forest is sacred; it is the home of their spirits and ancestors.' Tropenbos DRC's role, he emphasises, is to stand beside the communities. 'You can design a project and plant trees. But if the initiative does not originate from the people themselves, the trees will be cut down the moment the project ends. We see this time and again in other projects.'

But helping a community organise takes time and persistence, Mpoyi stresses. 'You need a field team that actually lives with the community for a long period. If you live in town and just visit for a week, you will not truly understand what people want. You will not speak the right language—literally and culturally— nd the community will not feel comfortable opening up to you or trusting you.'

Equally important is the mindset you bring. 'Do not assume only the project staff know,' Mpoyi says. 'Community members hold valuable insights. They often understand things outsiders simply do not grasp. What counts as success and what ends in failure— hey are the real experts.'

But locally led development also comes with dilemmas. Community members do not always want the same things as outsiders—or even as the Tropenbos staff working alongside them. Yet it is precisely in these moments of friction that valuable new solutions can emerge, says Mpoyi.

One such example arose when Tropenbos DRC proposed growing cocoa through agroforestry by combining cocoa with other tree species. Research shows that shaded cocoa plants can yield better harvests. But the community had a different idea.

'Innovation emerges through interaction with outsiders and by learning from one another.'

'They only wanted to grow cocoa,' Mpoyi explains. 'They had seen migrants from Eastern DRC making good money from cocoa plantations combined with banana trees. The local community wanted that same success— ust without the banana.'

Mpoyi: 'In our conversations, we reached a shared understanding. The community realised they could learn a lot from the migrants' cultivation methods. They became open to planting certain trees alongside cocoa— ike fruit trees or trees that host edible caterpillars, which have economic value. The key in this process is that the community owns it.'

This example highlights why a locally led approach must be flexible. Mpoyi adds, 'The community can make a plan and set a goal, but if circumstances change, they need the freedom to adjust it. Just like with cocoa cultivation—you have to be open to change and not push through your agenda as an organisation.'

The story from the DRC illustrates a key insight, reflects Roderick Zagt, head of programmes at Tropenbos International in Ede: communities never develop plans in complete isolation. 'When someone in a village proposes an idea, it's not necessarily the perfect answer,' he says. 'Innovation emerges through interaction with outsiders and by learning from one another.'

To foster this exchange, Tropenbos International organises collaborative learning sessions, creating spaces where people from diverse backgrounds and organisations openly share knowledge and learn together.

A dilemma that often arises, says Anita van der Laan, is the exclusion of women from decision-making. 'Women's voices need to be heard because if we come up with something meant to benefit them while they are not at the table, there is a high chance it will not work. But in communities where women are traditionally excluded, how do we address this without imposing Western ideas about gender equity? That process also has to be locally led.'

One approach comes from the DRC, where there was significant resistance to women's participation in forest management discussions. Mpoyi explains: 'In the community's culture, women have few rights. They could not speak on equal terms with men about forest management. We invited women to meetings, but they stayed silenti— t looked like they had no opinions.'

To address this, Tropenbos DRC organised a dedicated session for exchanging experiences and discussing how the community itself viewed women's roles and participation.

It turned out that a few women in the community did hold leadership positions, even though local cultural norms officially did not allow it. Some were administrative leaders or customary chiefs. They were not many, but they existed.

Tropenbos DRC asked these women: How do you manage to be a leader when it is said that women cannot be leaders? Instead of providing external training on women's rights, the approach was to listen to those who had already broken through the barriers.

The next step was for these strong women to support and mentor other women in the community, helping them find their own paths to leadership.

TBI(Tropenbos International):
'Making knowledge work for people and the forest'

Tropenbos International is a research and development organisation. It aims for forest communities to benefit from the sustainable use of forests, in thriving and climate-resilient landscapes.

It does so by helping to develop and apply locally owned, evidence-based solutions that improve the governance and management of forested landscapes. Tropenbos International originated as a Dutch knowledge centre of university-based researchers.
It has evolved over the past nearly forty years into a global network with independent partner organisations in seven countries deeply embedded in forested landscapes under threat in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia.


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Grace Maingi

When it comes to locally-led development, the devil is in the details. This is according to Grace Maingi and Caesar Ngule, who lead the Kenyan Community Development Foundation (KCDF). In our conversation with them, they explain why community giving is the most important key to truly community-led work and meaningful equality. 'International solidarity must be complementary to local solidarity.'

by Eunice Mwaura and Marc Broere

Neither of them has to think long about the opening question of the conversation. Is the role of the community still underestimated in the world of development cooperation? 'Absolutely,' affirms Grace Maingi, Executive Director of the *KCDF*.

'Even today, conversations about development often assume that outsiders or people in urban areas know the solutions, rather than consulting the community itself. That is why we still see project proposals drafted and interventions planned without input from the very people for whom these projects are intended,' she says.

'You can also still see this attitude within the language use as well. People are called *beneficiaries*, implying that something is being done *for* them rather than *with* them. As if they are passive receivers instead of active participants in their own development.'

Caesar Ngule, Programme Director of *KCDF*, nods: 'When foreign aid to Africa started, most countries had just gained independence. The prevailing attitude was that development aid meant doing things *for* others, such as building infrastructure or providing water, because it was assumed that local people did not know what was best for them.

'That mindset has not shifted enough, even as development cooperation has become a professional sector. In our work at *KCDF*, we see countless communities driving their own development through local philanthropy and by influencing government. Increasingly, it feels as though the development sector is the one playing catch-up,' he states.

More and more development organisations now claim to be 'community-led.' In fact, it has almost become a buzzword in the sector. 'The ambition and good intentions are certainly there,' says Maingi. 'But if the community truly leads you, then how does that show up in your work and in the way you engage with the people you serve?

'It must go beyond being a fancy phrase in reports or plans to real action. The real challenge lies in the details: What does it *actually* mean to be community-led? Are we willing to adjust our systems and processes accordingly?

She continues: 'Because if the community genuinely drives your work, then your role as a funder shifts. You are no longer the one doing everything. You become a facilitator, working alongside the community, but no longer leading the process. That leadership belongs to them.'

Ten shillings raised locally in Kenya is worth far more than the same amount sourced abroad.

The Kenyan Community Development Foundation (*KCDF*) is a pioneer in championing community-led development. Ahead of the conversation, Ngule leafed through *From Seed to Institution,* a *KCDF* publication that documents the organisation's journey since its inception in 1997.

KCDF was born out of frustration with the aid system of the 1990s. At the time, Kenyan professionals working with institutions such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the Government of Kenya, and the private sector had witnessed firsthand how donor funds were managed.

Too often, a large share of resources was lost in processes before reaching communities, and the little that did trickle down was beyond the communities' control. As a result, projects often failed to create the impact donors had envisioned, where it was most needed.

With largely unrestricted support from the Ford Foundation and the Aga Khan Foundation, *KCDF's* founders were able to establish an organisation with a bold vision: Kenyans giving and working together for shared prosperity. Working with communities is something Ngule reflects on every day, a process he believes requires constant self-examination.

For example, how do you know when a community is simply telling you what they think you want to hear? How do you avoid unintentionally reinforcing a top-down approach, even when you believe you are being inclusive and participatory?

'You have to build relationships where partners feel safe enough to give you honest feedback,' Ngule advises. 'Always be mindful of the power you hold as a funder, an intermediary organisation, or a development professional.

'And what happens when the community's priorities do not align with yours? Are you still willing to provide resources to support them and then step back?' he asks. 'No one can claim the title of a 'truly local' development organisation by default.'

He continues: 'That recognition is earned when communities themselves see you that way; through your relationships with them, your understanding of their realities, and your ability to align your support with their priorities.

'Being founded in Kenya, or simply opening a country or regional office here, does not automatically make an organisation locally led,' he explains. 'We have to go beyond offices and build equitable processes, meaningful relationships, and community-centred investments.

'Before launching any initiative, whether a new programme, an expansion into a new area, a scale-up, or an innovation, we must ask: will this leave the community stronger, with more power to solve its own development priorities in a rapidly changing world?

'Every organisation must continually examine whether it is truly needed, and where exactly it adds value in the development ecosystem. At *KCDF,* this is an ongoing reflection,' he adds, 'ensuring we focus on what we do best, complement rather than duplicate others' work, and maximise impact through leverage and collaboration.'

According to Ngule, one of the most critical conditions for truly community-led work is that collaboration must go beyond a transactional, financing-only relationship. He prefers to refer to the communities and community organisations *KCDF* works with as allies and partners rather than beneficiaries waiting to receive support.

'We focus on building long-term, collaborative relationships where our allies know that the partnership is not tied to a single project or budget cycle,' he explains. 'It is grounded in long-term solidarity and a shared commitment to accelerating the achievement of their priorities.'

Unearmarked funding, Ngule notes, is also crucial for genuine collaboration. '*KCDF* itself is increasingly receiving unearmarked funds from our own donors. So why should we dictate to our partners how they spend such funds? The more funders embrace this form of trust-based giving, the more we can address power imbalances and engage in true community-led development.'

Another key piece of advice Ngule offers to organisations striving to work in a community-led way is to invest time in truly understanding the communities they serve. 'Get as close as possible,' he says.

'A community is made up of people with diverse backgrounds, levels of education, and experiences. You need to hear a variety of voices to co-create solutions; not only from community leaders but also through everyday conversations in local gathering places and social spaces.'

Caesar Ngule

What sets KCDF apart from many organisations working on localisation is that it goes a step further by linking localisation to domestic resource mobilisation and community philanthropy.

Over the years, *KCDF* has learned through experience that communities are far more likely to own and sustain projects when they have actively contributed to making them a reality—whether through financial support, in-kind contributions, or other meaningful engagement.

For Ngule, embracing this approach was a learning curve. 'When I joined *KCDF*, my very first assignment was to run a local fundraising programme aimed at helping our partners raise at least fifty percent of their funds locally,' he recalls.

'Honestly, after two weeks, I almost wrote my resignation letter. It was such a foreign concept to me. I had grown up with the mindset that money for projects always came from outside. But after a month or two, I began to thrive. That experience has completely reshaped how I view development.

'It is not just about finding money, it is about believing that the resources exist right here, within our communities,' he explains. 'I always say: ten shillings raised locally in Kenya is worth far more than the same amount sourced abroad.

'The difference lies in the depth of the connection. People give because they truly understand the problem or value the solution being implemented. That does not mean I dismiss international solidarity, far from it.

'It remains vital. But it should complement, not replace, local solidarity. When communities and countries build that layered support system, that is when true community-led development becomes possible.'

Grace Maingi nods in agreement. 'For us, the focus is on helping communities—whether individuals, groups, or organisations—recognise that everyone has something to give. No one can truly say they have nothing to offer.

'Even if it is not financial, your expertise, time, or presence is valuable. The key is to help people see how they can give, and where their contributions can make the greatest impact.'

She continues: 'Giving is also about stepping out of your comfort zone. That is why we offer people different options: Can they give in kind? Contribute financially? Share their time or expertise? And beyond that, how can that giving be sustained to address a community problem in a meaningful way?

'A big part of encouraging giving is about showing impact. People need to see where their contribution is going and what it is helping to achieve. In Kenya, for example, people are very willing to support a child's education,' she explains.

'It is tangible—you want this child to go to school and have a better life. What we are trying to do is broaden that vision. What if, instead of supporting just one child, we also invested in the systems and structures that enable many children to access education? That is where sustainability begins.

'We offer programmes to make this possible. Individuals and groups can, for instance, contribute to an endowment fund that grows over time and funds multiple scholarships,' she adds. 'Alternatively, they can support citizen engagement efforts, or even personally take part in dialogues with county and national governments, to shape education policy and contribute to strategies that ensure access to education for generations of children.

'At *KCDF*, we are always searching for pathways that make it easier for people to join this wider community of giving and engagement,' Maingi explains. 'Participation is contagious—when one person gives ten or twenty shillings, another may feel inspired to give fifty or a hundred.

'And when people see others contributing toward the same goal, a powerful sense of togetherness emerges. They realise they are not alone; that they are part of something bigger. That collective energy is what truly drives change,' she states.

The New Ubuntu Generation

Kenya has been in the news frequently over the past year due to protests led by young people, the Gen-Z, against President Ruto's policies. This generation appears deeply socially engaged. Does their activism align with the principles of *Ubuntu* and community philanthropy? Grace Maingi believes it does.

'Every generation expresses itself differently,' she says. 'What we see in Gen-Z is that the sense of community is still very much alive— t just takes new forms.

'Their protests against the government were, in many ways, community philanthropy in action. There was trust: young people sent mobile money to others they had never met, to support those injured in the protests. Those who received the funds reported back on how the money was used. Others translated the Finance Bill into local languages or created *USSD* codes to enable money transfers without internet access.

'This is solidarity. This is generosity. This is community—just expressed differently from what my generation is used to,' Maingi reflects. 'We grew up with *harambees* and passing physical envelopes around to collect funds. Gen-Z does it through social media, mobile money, and digital organising— ut the heart behind it is the same.

'And just like any generation, they inspire one another: *Who is giving? Who is showing up at the protests? I want to be part of that.* The method may have changed, but the principle is unchanged—when they see human suffering, they act.'

Community giving, Ngule adds, is deeply aligned with African traditions. 'That culture of giving and solidarity runs throughout Africa,' he says. 'Across the continent's many cultures, values of sharing, mutual support, and collective responsibility are deeply rooted.

'In some languages, there isn't even an exact English word to capture it, but every African culture has a concept that predates formal education or the colonial systems of charity.' Western aid, Ngule warns, can sometimes unintentionally threaten this culture of giving and collective responsibility.

He shares an example: 'We worked with a community where residents had agreed to dig ditches for a water pipeline. Many did not have money, but they had time and labour and were willing to offer both. There was a strong sense of community spirit driving that project.

'Then, in a neighbouring village, another donor arrived and began paying residents to dig ditches for a similar pipeline. Almost overnight, the spirit of collective responsibility in our community began to unravel.

'People started asking why they should volunteer when others were being paid for the same work. Interestingly, that donor could not sustain their approach over the long term.

'We must protect and nurture the culture of *Ubuntu*. If we are not careful, the very systems we create risk eroding our greatest strength: our ability to stand on our own and sustain change for the long term.'

Maingi nods. 'Because money easily translates into buying things, it is often seen as more valuable. Time and knowledge feel less tangible—you cannot 'cash in' the hours someone has given in the same way you can a cheque. Yet that contribution is just as important.

'Someone who donates their time and skills to a project begins to feel true ownership. It becomes *their* project. That level of engagement is very different from someone who contributes money from thousands of miles away. Our role is to validate all forms of giving and to remind people that generosity is not measured only in shillings.'

Ngule adds a concrete example of how *KCDF* puts this principle into practice. 'Take the case of digging a ditch or building a school,' he explains. 'The community knows exactly the market value of the work. For a ditch, for example, they measure in units of seven meters and know it costs three hundred shillings per unit if you hire labour.

'So, if a community member voluntarily digs those seven meters, we record that as a three-hundred-shilling contribution. In effect, they have monetised their labour, and we capture that in our accounting as part of the project's cash contributions.

"Our goal is not just to keep records but to actively dismantle power dynamics. We want to challenge the perception that someone who donates money gives more value to a project than someone who contributes their time or knowledge. Recognising all forms of giving reinforces the idea that everyone is an equal partner.'

As we wrap up the conversation, we ask them for a final tip for organisations that genuinely want to work in a locally led way.

'One of the most important things,' Maingi says, 'is to allow communities to articulate what they are already contributing. Do not come in with the mentality of, '*We have the money and expertise, and we are here to deliver.* Instead, start with an honest conversation: You want to join in addressing this problem. That approach acknowledges and respects the efforts communities are already making.

'Ask: What are they already doing to address the problem or seize the opportunity? What else could you do to complement those efforts? How can you build on what already exists? I encourage organisations to be brave enough to have these conversations. This is how you begin to create a level playing field and dismantle harmful power dynamics.'

'Recognising all forms of giving reinforces the idea that everyone is an equal partner.'

The Power of Local Philanthropy

Grace Maingi describes community philanthropy as the practice of mobilising both cash and non-cash resources to meet a community's needs. It is about individuals coming together to offer their time, knowledge, and financial resources to tackle local development challenges. Community philanthropy lies at the heart of the work of community foundations like *KCDF*, whose mission is to ensure that locally available resources are directed toward local priorities.

KCDF is also a partner in the *Giving for Change* programme, funded by the Dutch government under the *Power of Voices* partnerships. The initiative seeks to strengthen local philanthropy as a driver of community-led development. Other partners in the program include the Global Fund for Community Foundations (*GFCF*), Africa Philanthropy Network (*APN*), Wilde Ganzen, Comuá Network, Coordenadoria Ecumê ica de Serviço, and the Dalia Association.

‘Glocalisation’ is the Future

With fair bananas, chocolate, and jeans, Solidaridad put fair consumption on the global map. Now, as power balances shift and funding streams in the development world dry up, the network organisation is once again taking the lead.

by Elian Yahye

Photos by Leonard Fäustle.

Shatadru Chattopadhyay remembers it as if it were yesterday. In 2006, the Indian political economist visited the Netherlands and stepped into an Aldi supermarket. There, he came across a tall Dutchman handing out free coffee to passersby. His message was simple: *better to take it for free than to pawy a price that fails to guarantee farmers a living income.*

That man was Dutch economist Nico Roozen, then director of the development organisation Solidaridad. Roozen was also one of the founders of the Max Havelaar label, now known as Fairtrade. Over the years, he has managed to persuade various Dutch companies to start sourcing fair products.

‘I was immediately inspired by his story,’ recalls Chattopadhyay at Solidaridad’s office in Utrecht. ‘He wanted to connect the global North and South; bringing a coffee farmer from Mexico to the Netherlands to share his story, and convincing customers to pay just a little more for that coffee in exchange for a fair product.’

Since then, Solidaridad has grown into an international organisation active across various production chains, from Fairtrade bananas to ethically produced jeans. In 2007, Chattopadhyay joined as director of the Asian division. Sitting beside him is Rachel Wanyoike, who oversees East and Central Africa. The Kenyan became director in 2018. Smiling, she adds, ‘I am the newest addition to the team.’

Solidaridad proudly describes itself as a network organisation. That is why Chattopadhyay has his reservations about the term ‘*localisation.*’ ‘We prefer to use the word ‘*glocalisation*’—and in my view, that is the future.’

To illustrate how Solidaridad works ‘*glocally,*’ Chattopadhyay points to Kanpur, a city in northern India crossed by the sacred Ganges River— evered by Hindus as the goddess Ganga. Kanpur is also a bustling hub of the leather industry.

Around 250,000 people were directly or indirectly employed in leather processing. For years, heavy chemicals were used to produce shoes, jackets, and other clothing—chemicals that ultimately flowed into the Ganges, with devastating consequences for farmers downstream. Eventually, the courts intervened and ordered the tanneries to close.

Chattopadhyay: ‘Fortunately, we were able to prevent that. Through our contacts with the Dutch government and the *RVO,* we connected with the Dutch company Stahl, which had developed a chrome-free tanning technique that allowed leather to be processed without harmful chemicals. We launched a project and, in doing so, saved the leather industry while keeping the river clean.

‘A crisis ultimately became a business opportunity. Together, we reduced pollution, lowered the toxic load on the Ganges, and helped Stahl establish a sustainable business model that also created jobs. That is the power of a global network: connecting local problems with practical, profitable solutions from all over the world.’

Wanyoike: ‘When I heard about the project in India, I thought: *we can use that here too.* We applied the same model with tanneries in Ethiopia, but on a smaller scale— solution from India, reused in Ethiopia, and adapted to the local situation.’

How exactly does such a network organisation work? Are all regional branches equal, and how is the global strategy determined?

Wanyoike: ‘Our board consists of representatives from all regions, so everyone has a voice. Every few years, we come together to set long-term goals and priorities on a global scale. We look at the *‘signs of the times’*—emerging challenges such as food security or climate change. As a board, we analyse these trends and jointly decide what to focus on for the next five years.’

‘A crisis ultimately became a business opportunity.’

Do all regional Solidaridad offices work on the same themes?

Wanyoike: 'Yes. But we always translate them to the regional level: for example, what does *climate change* mean in each specific context? In one region, it may mean extreme weather events or drought. In another, it may primarily result in food insecurity, while elsewhere water scarcity remains the biggest issue.

'Often, challenges look very similar. One issue identified by several regional organisations was soil degradation~~t~~— he loss of soil quality,' partly caused by agriculture. The UN warns that by 2050, about ninety percent of the world's soils could be degraded.

'In response, Solidaridad decided to work on a new certification for responsible soil use. This led them to Wageningen University, which was already conducting in-depth research on regenerative agriculture~~m~~ ethods that maintain or improve soil quality.

Chattopadhyay: 'Wageningen's research validated traditional, ancestral practices that have been used for centuries. Think of crop rotation to keep the soil healthy, intercropping to control pests and improve yields, or covering the soil with organic material to retain moisture—methods that small-scale farmers in Asia and Africa have relied on for generations.

'Recognising this overlap, the organisation helped launch Regenagri~~n~~ ow the leading standard for regenerative agriculture worldwide, based in London. Since 2020, Regenagri has certified over 2.2 million hectares globally, resulting in improved soil quality, greater biodiversity, and higher incomes for farmers.'

Chattopadhyay: 'This is a beautiful example: a problem arises, an existing solution is introduced, then we return to our own traditional values — and ultimately it grows into a global programme for everyone.'

The regional organisations have a high degree of autonomy and a close view of what is happening locally. Does your working method look different in each region?

Chattopadhyay: 'Absolutely. Take certification. Solidaridad was involved in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the Better Cotton Initiative. But we quickly discovered that these standards had been developed from a Western perspective.'

He explains...

'It is like that old children's story: one stick is easy to break, but six sticks bound together are unbreakable.'

Chattopadhyay: 'By working closely with farmers, it became clear that global standards were not a problem in themselves, but they were often too expensive to implement—especially for producers without access to premium markets that make certification financially worthwhile.

'And even though we are a network organisation, we used to apply those standards without really questioning them. Eventually, we decided to change course. We developed new national certifications with local partners, such as Trustea in India.

'These align with existing national legislation, so no extra rules are required and costs remain low. They involve local stakeholders and connect farmers directly with markets that pay fairly. This makes certification affordable, practical, and locally managed.'

Wanyoike: 'Sometimes the difference lies in something as small as terminology. Take '*smallholder farmers*': it may sound universal, but in practice it varies greatly. In India, a smallholder often has about two hectares, while a small coffee farmer in Brazil may manage between five and twenty hectares. In Kenya, it is typically between 0.5 and three hectares.

'The challenges may look the same, but the context is completely different. In some regions, you work with ten farmers on a thousand hectares; in others, with a thousand farmers on the same plot. So no, you cannot simply copy everything~~b~~— ut we can certainly learn a great deal from each other.'

There is a growing trend in the development world to fund civil society organisations in the Global South as directly as possible. How does a network organisation like Solidaridad view this?

Chattopadhyay: 'Yes, that shift is happening—and not just in the Netherlands. Many Asian governments have already moved to this system. Much development funding now goes directly to local embassies, to ensure better alignment with the local context.

'This was also the case with the *RVO*: they mainly supported local *NGOs*. For us, it does not really matter whether the office managing the funds is in Africa, Europe, or Asia, as long as it aligns with our shared goals.'

Wanyoike: 'Whether the money comes from global, regional, or local sources, the mission must always be to use it where the need is greatest.'

Is there still a role for the European and North American parts of the network? And what does that role look like?

Chattopadhyay: 'There absolutely is. Europe is important for fundraising, but it is also crucial for engaging the private sector—especially Dutch *SMEs*.

'Take Asia, where we work with two million farmers. Dutch companies often have smart, sustainable solutions for things like irrigation or seeds, but they find it difficult to access the Asian market. The European office helps make that connection.'

Wanyoike: 'Western offices also help build bridges—sometimes in very practical ways. If I want to work with an organisation like the European Commission or the World Bank, the contract is often signed in Brussels or New York. Our European and North American offices play a key role in that.

'Another task is amplifying farmers' voices in key policy discussions. For example, the EU recently introduced the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (*CSDDD*), a regulation requiring companies to conduct business responsibly.

'This has major implications for farmers in the South. The European branch helps bring their concerns and experiences to policymakers, ensuring that the rules support farmers rather than hinder them.'

So, there is still a role for the Western branch, even as attention and funding increasingly flow directly to the South.

Wanyoike: 'Absolutely! The connection with Europe and North America remains crucial. Our funding doesn't just come from governments but

also from individual donors who support Solidaridad. It is important to maintain a European presence to keep that relationship strong.

'Europe also plays a vital role in market development. For example, if a Dutch company wants to establish a sustainable cocoa chain from Ghana, Solidaridad Europe works closely with our team in Ghana to shape that together with farmers. We need the insights from the Netherlands to gain access to the Dutch market.'

> ***'For us, glocalisation is not just a trend; it is the future.'***

The biggest shock in the development sector this year was the U.S. cuts to USAID. How does your model help organisations withstand such sudden changes?

Chattopadhyay: 'Our approach is very future-proof. Twenty years ago, most of our global funding came from the Netherlands. Today, that is less than half, with the remainder coming from international and even local sources.

'That does not mean Dutch support is not important—on the contrary. But it shows that building a network organisation creates financial independence. If you are dependent on just one funder— say, the Netherlands~~a~~— change there affects the whole network.

'It is like that old children's story: one stick is easy to break, but six sticks bound together are unbreakable. That resilience is essential in an uncertain world, as the *USAID cuts have painfully made clear.'

So, is Solidaridad less worried about declining development budgets in the West than other organisations?

Chattopadhyay: 'Yes~~a~~— nd besides, there is never true equality when one office manages most of the money. Are you really equal if one branch controls eighty million euros and another only two million? Without financial clout, there is no real influence.'

Wanyoike: 'We adapt to the reality on the ground, and the work must go on—whether development partners decide to join in, scale back, or stop altogether. For us, *glocalisation* is not just a trend; it is the future. And fortunately, almost everyone is moving in that direction.'

The Commune That Overturned the Rules of Power

In Pélengana, a rural commune near Ségou, Mali, the Accountable Local Governance Programme (*PGLR+)* is driving a transformative shift in how local governance works. By empowering youth and women, increasing transparency, and strengthening community participation, the initiative has raised tax collection, funded essential infrastructure, and rebuilt trust in local institutions.

by Oumar Sankare

Photos by Mohammad Ag Rhissa

The story of Pélengana shows what becomes possible when governance is effective and institutions are strong—communities trust, participate, and prosper together. It demonstrates how inclusive decision-making and accountable leadership can transform fragile systems into resilient ones, even in the midst of crisis.

That vision of communities shaping their own future through transparency, participation, and mutual accountability lies at the heart of the Accountable Local Governance Programme (*PGLR+*), a €21 million initiative funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by a consortium led by *SNV.*

Across 240 communes in Mali, *PGLR+* is redefining how local institutions function by placing youth and women at the centre of decision-making and strengthening the bond between citizens and authorities through trust, innovation, and collective action.

In Pélengana, just five kilometres from Ségou, the programme's vision has taken root. It has boosted tax collection, funded vital infrastructure, empowered women and youth, and restored confidence in local government. Through youth-led campaigns, women's savings groups, and transparency contests, Pélengana is fast becoming a model of inclusive, resilient governance in Mali.

In this quiet but profound transformation stands Mastan Traoré, a market gardener and mother of three. Once too shy to speak in public, she now addresses community meetings with confidence. 'The mentorship programme gave me the capacity and courage,' she says proudly, serving today as the information secretary of the local Community Health Association (*ASACO*).

Seated beside her is Yaya Coulibaly, a young leader trained through the programme. He mobilises residents to pay the Regional and Local Development Tax (*TDRL*), which has risen dramatically—from just fourteen percent in 2019, to 74 percent in 2024.

Stories like Mastan's and Yaya's may seem isolated, but together they capture the essence of *PGLR+*. By placing youth and women at the centre of decision-making, the programme highlights challenges while celebrating concrete, sustainable solutions.

These personal journeys anchor the broader story of Pélengana's transformation, and set the stage for how innovation and inclusion are reshaping local governance in Mali.

To grasp the scale of the transformation, one must first understand the systemic barriers that have long held back local governance in Mali. Decades of insecurity, institutional fragility, and eroding public trust have weakened regional institutions and strained relations between citizens and their leaders.

In regions such as Ségou, Timbuktu, Gao, and Mopti, low citizen participation and a lack of transparency have long hindered development. Before *PGLR+,* community engagement in Pélengana rarely extended beyond village chiefs, while tensions over local taxes simmered. 'People did not understand where their money was going,' recalls Yaya. This disconnect reflects a national challenge: how to establish inclusive governance in a fragile context?

Mastan Traoré, Informant of a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), and elected Member of ASACO.

SNV-Yaya Coulibaly, a young leader trained by the Accountable Local Governance Program (PGLR+)

In Pélengana, young leaders trained by the local partner *ALPHALOG* have become catalysts of progress. Yaya, a *PGLR+* focal point, embodies this change. 'We organise discussions in every village to explain citizens' rights and duties,' he says.

Through door-to-door campaigns, these teams have demystified the purpose of the *TDRL,* helping raise its collection rate to an impressive 74 percent in 2024. The funds have since financed essential infrastructure, including a new civil registry office and a Youth Centre for cultural and economic activities.

Yet, as Mayor Diabaté Mariam Bamba emphasises, the transformation is about more than numbers. 'Youth must be at the centre of initiatives because their vision differs from that of previous generations,' she says.

Madame Diabaté Mariam Bamba, mayor of Pélengana, Ségou region

Under her leadership, the programme has encouraged collaborative decision-making, with the communal council now consulting youth, women, and traditional leaders before launching projects. 'Decisions are collective,' she insists.

This inclusive process has ensured that young people's priorities—such as building classrooms and rehabilitating water points—are now embedded in the commune's Social, Economic, and Cultural Development Plan (*PDSEC*).

The economic ripple effects are already visible. Pélengana's youth have launched agricultural cooperatives and cattle-fattening initiatives that are reducing unemployment and curbing rural exodus.

'The Youth Centre hosts training and income-generating activities,' says Yaya. One such example is the Union of Young Farmers, founded by trained youth, which has revitalised local agriculture and encouraged members to reinvest their profits in community projects.

These efforts—bolstered by the training of 9,418 young leaders nationwide—show how youth agency is reshaping local governance from the ground up. The impact extends beyond Pélengana.

The commune's Youth Centre, equipped with chairs, an awning, and sound systems thanks to a transparency contest prize, now serves as a model for youth-led development across Mali, fostering both civic engagement and economic empowerment.

> ***'When people see tangible results, they engage more.'***

Women, too, are fast becoming the backbone of Pélengana's transformation. Mastan, an active member of a Village Savings and Loan Association (*VSLA*), embodies this shift. 'Our group allows us to buy fertiliser on credit and fund our projects,' she explains.

In 2023 alone, 73 *VSLAs* were created, bringing together 1,800 women aged eighteen to forty. But their impact stretches far beyond financial resilience. These groups have become powerful social anchors. 'Our weekly meetings strengthen our bonds and help us resolve family and community conflicts,' Mastan adds, highlighting how *VSLAs* create spaces for dialogue and mutual support.

Mentorship—another *PGLR+* innovation—is accelerating women's empowerment. As a mentor, Chaka Traoré supports young women like Mastan in stepping into public engagement. 'Mentorship taught me to speak with confidence,' says Mastan, now an influential member of the *ASACO.*

While women's participation in decision-making spaces stands at 27 percent, the trajectory is promising: 1,234 women now hold leadership positions in local structures, and former mentees are taking up roles in management committees. As *PGLR+* project lead Binta Dansoko explains, '*VSLAs* and mentorship create a virtuous cycle where economic empowerment fuels political influence.'

This momentum extends beyond Pélengana. In communes such as Djenné in the Mopti region, young women are increasingly stepping into leadership roles within *ASACOs,* challenging long-standing norms. These steady shifts point toward more inclusive and equitable governance—driven by women's growing agency and reinforced by *PGLR+'s* commitment to inclusion.

A cornerstone of *PGLR+'s* impact is the transparency contest, which strengthens accountability by turning good governance into a source of healthy competition. Evaluated on criteria such as public assemblies, participatory budgeting, and financial transparency, the contest has helped Pélengana distinguish itself.

In 2018, the commune received thirty million *FCFA,* which they used to finance the construction of a new civil registry office. An additional seven million *FCFA* was used to equip the Youth Centre. 'These awards show that transparency pays,' reflects Yaya, recalling the tears of pride shed during the trophy ceremony at the regional governorate.

> ***'These awards show that transparency pays.'***

In 2024, 62 percent of the programme's 240 communes participated, with Pɛ́ engana among the five nominees for the 2025 Pan-African Local Leadership Award. These distinctions help fund priority projects and reinforce public trust.

'When people see tangible results, they engage more,' observes Yaya. Supported by the Transparency Information System (*SIT*)a— digital platform where communes upload required documents for eligibilityt— he contest encourages better governance practices, making transparency a shared norm.

Public accountability sessions have further deepened openness. In 2024, Pɛ́ engana held twelve sessions across its villages, mobilising 2,096 citizens, compared to fewer than one hundred in earlier years. These forums enable the mayor's office to report on its management, respond to public questions, and collect feedback.

'People now understand budgetary choices,' explains Madame Bamba. This openness has reduced misunderstandings and strengthened trust, as Binta Dansoko notes: 'Citizens know where their money is going.'

The *SIT* platform amplifies this transparency by making budgets and reports publicly accessible. In Pɛ́ engana, this visibility has attracted new partners, including the World Bank, which funded fifteen classrooms through the *PEDRAS* programme (State Resource Deployment Project for Improved Services and Local *COVID-19* Response), a Malian government initiative.

Improved access to clean water—reflected in functionality rates rising from 53 to 73 percent after training 1,113 artisansf— urther demonstrates how transparency fosters more effective public services.

'Youth must be at the centre of initiatives because their vision differs from that of previous generations.'

Binta Dansoko, PGLR+ project leader for Ségou, San, Gao et Ménaka regions

Yaya Coulibaly, Mastan Traoré and Chaka Traoré.

Despite these gains, challenges persist. Insecurity in regions such as Gao, Tombouctou, Ségou, and Mopti continues to restrict participation, while early scepticism in Pɛ́ engana required sustained awareness efforts.

'Some saw us as threats, agents of the mayor's office,' recalls Yaya. By leading through example—paying their own taxes and explaining their use—young leaders gradually broke down this resistance.

However, Madame Bamba highlights a broader issue: 'Limited central government engagement creates a disconnect. Some communes have never received an official visit from government representatives.'

In response, *PGLR+* adapts to local realities. In insecure areas, local focal points sustain activities, ensuring continuity. 'We classify communes by security levels to tailor our approach,' explains Binta Dansoko. In Pélengana, efforts focus on expanding participation, particularly for women, who remain underrepresented in strategic roles.

To secure lasting impact, *SNV* and the *PGLR+* implementation consortium—comprising *CORDAID, OXFAM*, and Voice for Thought (*V4T*)a— re institutionalising programme tools. *SNV* collaborates with the General Directorate of Territorial Communities (*DGCT*) on the transparency contest, and intergrating mentorship initiatives into national policies.

'We want to embed these practices within local institutions,' adds Binta Dansoko. In 2025, *PGLR+* will prioritise capacity building and inter-communal exchanges, like those held in Pɛ́ engana, to inspire other mayors.

Digital innovations, including local WebTV platforms like Bandiagara 24, which engages over thirty thousand subscribers, further amplify impact. By training 9,418 young leaders, including 4,333 women, *PGLR+* is forging a new generation of civic actors committed to sustainable governance.

Pɛ́ engana's story highlights the challenges of local governance while celebrating innovative solutions. Thanks to the efforts of young leaders like Yaya and Chaka, women such as Mastan, and dedicated officials like Madame Bamba, *PGLR+* is redefining the social contract.

'Trust is built through dialogue,' summarises Madame Bamba. By placing citizens at the centre, Pélengana offers a model for a more participatory and resilient Mali.

The Unheard, Now Speaking

Democratic Republic of Congo: Nudging a UN mission

Text: Bram Posthumus
Illustrations: Abdulwadud Bayo

Eastern Congo's wars have outlived generations and peacekeeping missions alike. But as the UN mission faces another uncertain renewal, local researchers and advocates are finding new ways to be heard—from Kinshasa to New York. Their influence helped shape Resolution 2765, proving that even in the world's longest-running conflict, diplomacy still has a local address.

This October marks the third decade of war in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). By all measures, this region has endured some of the world's most devastating armed conflicts—millions killed, millions more displaced (often multiple times), widespread human rights violations, especially gender-based violence of exceptional brutality, and environmental destruction on an immeasurable scale.

For twenty-six of those thirty years, United Nations peacekeepers have been part of the landscape. The first mission, MONUC~~t~~— he United Nations Organisation Mission in the DRC—was established in November 1999. In July 2010, it transitioned into MONUSCO, the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DRC.

By the early 2020s, frustration among Congolese civilians over the UN's limited protection gained political traction. Sensing an opportunity, politicians amplified these sentiments, and in 2022, the process of MONUSCO's withdrawal began.

In July 2024, however, that process was paused, as the ever-present armed groups filled up the space the UN blue helmets had vacated. Emmanuel Kabengele, a researcher and National Coordinator of the Africa Security Sector Network (ASSN), describes the process as 'hasty. It felt, and still feels, like a race against time. The South Kivu office has already closed, and we are witnessing the re-emergence of armed groups.'

ASSN has extensively studied the impact of MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu. Jair van der Lijn, Director of the Peace Operations and Conflict Management Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), offers this assessment:

'The push to remove MONUSCO was entirely tied to the 2022 legislative elections. Once those were over, politicians turned around and said, '*We still have conflicts—let us not send them away just yet*."

The upshot of it all: South Kivu today no longer has a MONUSCO presence, and its capital is now in the hands of a foreign-backed armed group, M23. This may or may not have happened regardless.

However, as Van der Lijn notes, while MONUSCO was still in place, there existed at least some semblance of administrative structure. That, too, is now gone. Although MONUSCO's withdrawal process is expected to resume at some point, the question remains~~h~~— ow?

The answer lies thousands of miles away in New York, where the UN General Assembly deliberates on peacekeeping missions and the UN Security Council (UNSC) determines their mandates. These mandates define what a UN mission can and cannot do and are renewed annually.

Anyone seeking to influence the direction of a mission's next mandate—wishing to nudge the Mission, if you like—must be in New York. In MONUSCO's case, the language of the renewal resolution must prioritise the protection of civilians, emphasise local solutions, elevate the role of civil society, and ensure that Security Sector Reform (SSR) remains central to the mission's mandate.

Kabengele knows the SSR inside out. 'It is a vast work in progress. We inherited a multitude of armed groups *alongside* the national armed forces. These now need to be transformed into a professional sector where the army, police, intelligence services, and justice system each have a clear role. And this must be done in a way that earns the public's trust.'

Even the task of forming a coherent army with a unified command-and-control structure is daunting enough~~a~~— nd, as Kabengele readily

The Vacuum of Retreat

admits, this is only partially underway.

'Some of these armed groups do not even want to leave their localities. They want to continue as before. Yet SSR lies at the very heart of what the DRC needs, and at the heart of what remains of the MONUSCO mission.'

To move this forward, local, national, and international NGOs formed a consortium called Just Future, which began in 2023 to engage key actors (government representatives, diplomats, and policymakers) in Kinshasa, Brussels, and New York.

The goal was clear: to ensure that crucial issues such as civilian protection, the role of civil society, and locally driven solutions are reflected in the language of MONUSCO's mandate renewal resolution, voted on each December. Our focus now turns to the 2024 effort.

Teodora Nguen is the security and justice expert for Cordaid, the lead organisation in the Just Future Alliance. She brought her Brussels experience into the new consortium. 'Before joining Cordaid, I worked for four years on the Great Lakes Region with the Europe-Central Africa Network (EurAc) in Brussels.

'One of the key things you learn there is how the European Union works. So, I had both an advantage— nd a reputation—coming from a network of 33 organisations that built real recognition in the art of advocacy.'

And doing so in a large international body, which— ike the UN— s often seen as unwieldy and immovable. One of the most powerful tools for advocacy today is the internet. 'We are very connected now,' one participant said during an online discussion for this article.

Information flows faster than ever before. 'In fact,' Nguen adds, 'we can now have far better and more nuanced analyses because we receive input directly from the field.' This connectivity also removes an old excuse: communication breakdowns can no longer be blamed when progress stalls.

The finger can now point squarely at the real culprit— lack of political will. Yet, political positions can move— nd be moved. In the case of MONUSCO, advocacy involved continuous diplomatic engagement.

Alongside numerous personal contacts, there were also formal settings—such as the June 2024 Round Table in Kinshasa, hosted by the Dutch Embassy—where key UN Security Council representatives met with local civil society representatives and familiarised themselves with ASSN's research findings.

Nguen explains: 'As advocacy groups, you have to be credible, useful, and relevant. You must be able to answer the question diplomats and bureaucrats will always ask— mplicitly, of course: why should I talk to you? Above all, you must build trust.

'Without trust, nothing moves. That means listening carefully and avoiding antagonism toward the people you need. I always take a personalised and constructive approach. You need to put people at ease. Diplomats are allies; they can get things done for us. So, you must know the people you want on your side.'

'Once trust and rapport are established,' Nguen continues, 'I create the space people need to talk.' And that means one thing: meetings. 'I open them, use icebreakers, provide structure, and when we've shared our recommendations, I always ask if our guests have any for us.' Reciprocity, and again, trust.

If this sounds like an extraordinary amount of preparation for an endless series of meetings in different places, you would be right. But without the willingness to invest that time and effort, advocacy simply does not work.

The October 2024 Round Table at the United Nations in New York—widely regarded as a success and a key influence on the final text of the MONUSCO mandate renewal resolution—was the culmination of that careful groundwork.

Many UN Security Council representatives attended, including most of the so-called Big Five (the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom). A special effort was made to ensure the participation of the Congolese delegation, achieved through the coordinated engagement of an all-African team with strong connections to the Congolese leadership. It worked.

'Because if these years of war have shown anything, it's that there are limits to what arms can achieve.'

At the Round Table, ASSN presented its report on the impact of MONUSCO's withdrawal from South Kivu, using it to argue for maintaining the mission's presence in North Kivu and Ituri.

SIPRI followed with its analysis of the mandate renewal process, highlighting how MONUSCO's eventual withdrawal could be made sustainable by prioritising Security Sector Reform (SSR) and the protection of civilians.

The most powerful moment came when Claudine Tsonga, director of the Congolese women lawyers' collective *Dynamique des Femmes Juristes*, shared her experiences. Based in Goma, her presence in New York brought an authentic, first-hand perspective from the ground to a global audience.

All of these contributions fed into what ultimately became Resolution 2765. A close reading of the text reveals SSR and the protection of civilians placed prominently at its core— nd the role of civil society is mentioned nine times, three times more than in the previous resolution.

Emmanuel Kabengele confirms the success. 'We went to New York in 2024 to help place SSR, the protection of human rights, and the role of civil society at the heart of MONUSCO's withdrawal plans. It was necessary, and I think it has worked.'

If anything, the Round Tables showed the effectiveness of linking lived experiences at the local level with the global diplomatic scene that makes decisions affecting those local communities.

However, we are not there yet. 'We still have more to do to position Just Future as a key civil society actor,' Nguen acknowledges. This is not to downplay what has already been achieved, but rather to encourage continued effort from a consortium that is still young and finding its footing.

On Cordaid's role within this effort, Nguen offers candid advice: 'Cordaid needs to be more forceful in shaping the agenda. We are not leading; we are participating. The job of *INGOs is to amplify the voices of communities and local or national NGOs— ecause without them, those voices go unheard. Make their voices heard.'

In essence, INGOs serve as a window through which the world can see realities on the ground. But, as Nguen suggests, that window should not distort the view. Civil society itself is diverse, and some actors think beyond conventional boundaries. As Van der Lijn observes, 'There is a sizeable group among civil society organisations that insists MONUSCO must leave entirely, believing that only then will state authorities finally be compelled to act.'

This raises an old but persistent question: why are governments more accountable to donors

than to their own taxpaying citizens? But that, perhaps, is a discussion for another day.

Of course, friction is inevitable within a diverse consortium like Just Future. 'Local civil society does not always see the value of pragmatism,' Nguen notes wryly. 'And there are tensions with international NGOs, which still need to learn humility.

'Much of what they contribute is constructive and relevant, but they often operate at 'higher,' more abstract levels.' The underlying message is clear: both perspectives are essential.

Resolution 2765 passed on 20 December 2024. Two weeks later, the rebel group M23 bulldozed its way toward two provincial capitals—Goma in North Kivu and Bukavu in South Kivu—seizing at least one lucrative tantalum mine and making MONUSCO's operations increasingly difficult.

As Kabengele put it, 'It all went very fast. They made their move, aided by the highly sophisticated weaponry that Rwanda provided. We're now facing an enormous increase in insecurity.'

'If anything, the Round Tables showed the effectiveness of linking lived experiences at the local level with the global diplomatic scene that makes decisions affecting those local communities.'

By the end of that month, Donald Trump's trademark transactional style of governance had re-emerged in Washington, D.C., and wasted no time. His administration's sights were set on the DRC's mineral wealth.

After reportedly preventing another valuable tantalum mine from falling into M23's hands through direct negotiations with Rwanda, the U.S. began pursuing stakes in lithium, copper, and cobalt.

The architect of this new scramble is the U.S. Special Envoy to the DRC, Massad Fares Boulos~~a~~– businessman whose son, Michael, is married … to Tiffany Trump. So where does that leave Resolution 2765?

Van der Lijn offers this assessment: 'Basically, the mission has the same objectives. But it is fair to say that, under the current circumstances, MONUSCO has little room to manoeuvre.'

As if to underscore his point, Bintou Keita, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and head of MONUSCO, reported in June that regular troop rotations could still not be carried out because M23 continued to keep Goma Airport closed.

MONUSCO's mandate is due for renewal at the end of 2025. In principle, Just Future should be able to build on the momentum it created last year for a renewed advocacy effort.

But Nguen sounds a note of caution, given the stance of the new U.S. administration and its hostility toward migrants and foreign visitors. 'I'm not sure I would want to take our African partners to New York again. It's not safe.'

Even for such an important mission, she argues, it would be unconscionable to expose members of the Just Future Alliance to the risk of being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

'We are not too optimistic,' admits Kabengele. 'It feels more like we're all trying to safeguard the absolute minimum. Our biggest challenge is that we are living in both a post-conflict and an active conflict situation—especially in the eastern part of the country. And there's fatigue; everyone is tired of it.'

Everyone, that is, except the fighters and their backers. Still, Kabengele Kalonji adds a glimmer of hope: 'At least there are talks,' he says, referring to ongoing mediation efforts by the East African Community, the Angolan government, the Vatican, and Qatar. 'So, we may yet maintain some hope.'

Is it all worth it? Van der Lijn is pertinent. 'You have to see these efforts in context. We nudge things gently in the right direction — influencing UN Security Council decisions through meetings shaped by ASSN and SIPRI studies, and bringing actors outside the usual diplomatic circles to the table. It's cost-effective.'

He adds: 'After all, Resolution 2765 is a significant achievement, considering the strong pushback within the UNSC against human rights, the rule of law, and civil society influence — not only from Russia and China, but also from some African governments, and now even the USA.'

Kabengele concurs. 'What we do has an impact — even at the level of the *UNSC, and also within the Congolese government, which would otherwise not be open to creating space for civil society. So, we continue to believe in what we do. Because if these years of war have shown anything, it's that there are limits to what arms can achieve.'

How Ugandan Villages Are Mapping Their Own Future

The PIP approach is a farmer-led initiative that redefines how development projects engage with rural communities. Instead of treating farmers as passive recipients of aid, it places them at the centre of decision-making, innovation, and problem-solving. We had the opportunity to witness this in practice during a visit to one of the project areas in western Uganda.

At the edge of the village a small nursery of coffee and tree seedlings has been established

Gideon Mubunga demonstrates how the community PIP works

Text: Abdulwadud Bayo and Marc Broere

Photos by McWilliams Wasswa

Nestled in the breathtaking hills of Bunyangabu District, Bukara Village stretches across terraced fields and lush greenery, its winding paths weaving through steep, rocky slopes and rolling farmland.

On the horizon, the jagged peaks of the Rwenzori Mountains rise against the sky. We are here on a mission: to witness the Participatory Integrated Planning (PIP) approach firsthand, an approach that has reshaped the lives of this community.

Our guide is Andrew Masinde, a former journalist with *New Vision*, Uganda's largest newspaper, who now works with the *Common Ground* project. With a background in development studies, he has grown deeply fascinated by the PIP model.

'The name itself holds three dimensions,' he explains. 'It is *participatory* because communities realise that challenges cannot be solved in isolation. One person cannot fix a broken road. But a hundred community members who all use that road can.'

The second element is *integration*: you must always have diverse activities on your land and in your household. 'Make sure you do not grow only one crop on your land,' Masinde advises.

'Diversify with different crops, keep a few animals for manure to enrich the soil, and set aside part of your land for a kitchen garden. That way, you secure food for your family instead of buying everything from the market.'

And all this requires good *planning*. Communities chart their realities and aspirations through maps. Masinde explains: 'People identify problems, such as water shortages, infertile fields, erosion, or even social conflict, and mark them on a village map.

'Then they draw a second map, one that reflects their ambitions for the next two to five years. For instance, a hillside now eroded can be reimagined with trees, ditches and grass. They mark out future sites for a tree nursery, a water source, or other improvements. That becomes the community PIP.'

There is also a household PIP, where a family (mother, father and children) identify both problems and aspirations within their household. 'They draw their home and land as they are today,' Masinde explains, 'and then draw a second version showing what they want to achieve in the future.'

At the edge of the village, this process comes to life. A small nursery of coffee and tree seedlings has been established, where about twenty people have gathered to work and exchange ideas. The local district officer, Karungi Sillah Brenda, observes with quiet approval.

When the group finishes tending the seedlings, a large map is unrolled. Gideon Mubunga steps forward to demonstrate how the community PIP works. 'I will present the vision of Bukara village for the period 2024ƨ 028,' he begins.

'This drawing reflects our ambitions for the next four years, built around six pillars: hygiene, environment, livestock, education, agriculture, and market access.'

The rest of the group settles on a nearby hill, listening attentively as Mubunga continues. 'As a community, we want to improve and maintain the roads and build a storage facility. This way, we will be less dependent on middlemen who buy our harvest at very low prices during peak season.

'With storage, we gain more bargaining power. We are also seeking support for a coffee processing machine, so we can add value ourselves and fetch better prices in the market.' He pauses, then points to another challenge: land degradation.

'We plan to restore several critically degraded sites in our village by digging ditches and planting a variety of trees grown in our own nursery. This will stop erosion, reduce flooding, and in a few years, we will also have more firewood.'

In this way, Mubunga takes the community through the remaining pillars. 'Bukara also needs a secondary school and a training centre where people can learn practical skills.

'We have several primary schools, but the nearest secondary schools are far away. As a result, many students drop out before completing their education. A local secondary school and training centre would ensure continuity in education.'

Finally, he points to a clinic drawn on the map. 'Health care is also a priority. The nearest clinic is in Rwajimpa, which is too far for many of us. We urgently need a health centre here in the village.'

After the presentation, we joined Gideon and his wife, Maria Mubunga, for the walk to their home. The hilly terrain made it a strenuous journey, but their lively conversation lightened the path. Gideon and Maria radiate affection for one another; something not often displayed so openly in traditional Ugandan society.

'We have been married for fifteen years and are still very much in love,' Gideon says with a laugh when we remark that they look like a newlywed couple. Maria chimes in: 'The secret of a good marriage is love, and we truly love each other. That is why we are still together. I love my husband because he is transparent and communicates well.'

Seated in front of their house, Gideon recounts how they first became involved in the project. 'Staff from *Common Ground* came to our community to introduce the PIP approach. They promised to return to train us, and they kept that promise. Since then, we have been inundated with new knowledge, from how to secure our livelihoods to better managing our small piece of land.'

'In the past, projects were designed from above, without consulting the community.'

Gideon and Maria Mubunga

Maria adds with a laugh, 'Before this, our land was always full of weeds, and our harvests kept declining. We had no idea how to keep the soil healthy and productive.'

'We have learned a lot,' Gideon says. 'Not only about agriculture and how to improve our crops, but also about sanitation, preventing land degradation, education, livestock, and even marketing our products. Most importantly, we were trained to create a vision and plan together. Now we have common goals we want to achieve as a couple.'

Maria nods in agreement. 'Before the PIP approach, everyone in this house did their own thing. We never worked together as a family. Through the training, we learned what it means to plan and act together, and how much that can improve our lives. Now we manage the farm as a team and even handle our finances together.

'We also make plans for the future, like the small building we want to put up next to our house to sell products. We have already started making bricks. We even installed electricity so the children can watch television. I am convinced that with the extra income from our farm, we will be able to send them to boarding school.'

Karungi Sillah Brenda, the sub-county chief of Bukara, is a young professional in her second job, originally from Fort Portal. Appointed by the government, she speaks with great affection about her posting.

'The moment I came here, I embraced the place and was ready to serve. I love regions with many hills and valleys. There is a saying among the people here: *Bukara is hard to reach, but easy to stay*. That is why I have already been here for one and a half years.'

The project has added an extra dimension to her work. 'What I find beautiful about the PIP approach is that it truly involves the community; it is an empowering approach. It has made my work much easier. When I started this job, the project had just been launched.

'At first, I thought it would be a waste of time and money, but now I am very enthusiastic about it. Even people who have never been to school can explain how the PIP approach works and how they have benefited from it.

'The project has played a crucial role in the transformation of our community. People now see the value of education, add value to their crops, understand their priorities, negotiate for what they need, and work together toward their goals,' she says.

Her initial scepticism had clear roots. 'In the past, projects were designed from above, without consulting the community. Many of these expensive projects failed because people did not feel connected to them, and there was no sense of ownership.

'The PIP approach is different—it starts with the community itself. People decide what should happen, where, and how. They take action for themselves instead of waiting for an organisation to step in. This makes the process sustainable. If you return here in five years, the knowledge will still be with the community, and people will have something to show that they are proud of,' she states.

From there, we make another tough climb to visit the home and land of Sharon Kabu. Unlike many others in Bukara, she is not an original resident of the village but came from Kasese, a district capital at the foot of the Rwenzori Mountains.

A few years ago, she and her husband moved to Bukara. 'We could no longer afford the rent in the city,' she explains, 'so we looked for a small piece of farmland we could buy with our savings. That is how we ended up here.'

Sharon has quickly adapted to her new life in Bukara. 'The people here are hospitable. We easily became part of the village,' she says with a smile. What she values most is the strong sense of community.

'People work well together, especially on issues that affect everyone. Because of this, the potential of the community is being tapped more and more.'

Kabu was among the PIP innovators~~t~~— he first group of thirty farmers in the village who underwent an intensive six-month training in vision planning and improved farming practices. These pioneers play a vital role in spreading the knowledge further.

Each innovator is responsible for training ten other villagers, usually neighbours and friends, through farmer-to-farmer sessions. Within a year, this ripple effect creates around three hundred PIP farmers in a community, often the majority of households. This critical mass becomes the driving force behind implementing the PIP plans made by the community.

When asked why she signed up for the very first group of thirty PIP farmers, Sharon explains: 'My husband and I have a background in agriculture. When I heard about something called a Participatory Integrated Plan for the farm, my interest was immediately aroused—especially because it involved integrating different crops on the same land.

Karungi Sillah Brenda, the sub-county chief of Bukara

'That was new to us. Out of pure curiosity, I joined the training. What struck me was how concrete it was: in one session, we identified our problems together and immediately began discussing causes and solutions.'

The training has since opened her eyes to new possibilities. 'We learned how to conserve soil and water by digging trenches and planting trees. I also picked up techniques like pruning coffee and banana plants. If our coffee and bananas bring in a good income, we plan to buy an extra piece of land for bananas. After that, we want to build a permanent house.'

It is, above all, a matter of mentality—approaching problems with a new mindset. She says, 'Our way of thinking has really changed. I can now confidently make a detailed plan for our household: what has to happen, how it has to happen, and where it has to happen.'

She also takes pride in sharing her knowledge with others. 'I have trained ten fellow residents in how to create a PIP and how to work together as a family with common goals. Now they, too, have started digging trenches to control erosion and

Sharon Kabu

are pruning their coffee plants.

'I first invited them to our home to show what I had done and how it had brought change. After that, it was easier to train them to apply the PIP in their own households.'

We walk across her land, carefully navigating the steep slopes, steadying ourselves on coffee shrubs and banana trees to keep from slipping. Sharon points proudly to a pig rooting around in the garden.

'With the proceeds from our first harvest, I was able to buy this pig. With the next harvest, I will buy more. The pigs provide manure for the coffee plants, which means even more income.'

As we take our leave, she reflects with a smile: 'I do not miss the city life I used to have. Here, I earn more, and we can provide for our livelihoods much better.'

We visit several other families whose stories echo those of Gideon and Maria Mubunga and Sharon Kabu. Andrew Masinde has watched closely, listening with interest. 'It is so beautiful to see communities changing,' he says.

'People now work together much better, even within households. They are really changing their mindset, or rather, building a new way of thinking. By making a plan, the PIP, people become motivated; they realise they can do things themselves and do not have to wait for the government.

'And if a man wants his household to grow, he must actively contribute instead of leaving everything to his wife. If you want to change a community, you must first change the mindset.'

This shift does not stop with households alone; it also reshapes leadership. 'At first, local leaders sometimes resisted,' Masinde explains. 'They were used to projects that distributed money or resources—seedlings, chickens, that kind of thing. In *Common Ground*, communities do not receive free handouts.

'But when leaders saw how much people were changing, they too began to support the project. What we are doing is truly a bottom-up approach. People become aware of their problems, then make an integrated plan together—whether as a village or as a family– nd start with what they can do themselves.'

'In the past, projects were designed from above, without consulting the community.'

He continues, 'If a project keeps giving handouts, people stop the moment the project ends because they have become dependent. But this approach encourages them to act, to take ownership of the changes, and to take responsibility for their community and household.'

He adds that once the mindset shifts, the results endure. 'When people are motivated, they keep maintaining the roads, restoring degraded hills, planting trees, and keeping their land healthy—even without the project.

'Tree nurseries also last because the communities themselves set them up. We encourage them to turn these into enterprises that can generate income. That way, something remains even after the project has ended.'

Even if the project has stopped, the activities will continue because the mentality of the people has changed

Researcher Aad Kessler, together with other Dutch and African researchers, developed the Participatory Integrated Planning (PIP) approach, designed to motivate farmers and other stakeholders to commit to sustainable land management and landscape restoration.

Kessler, a sustainable land management researcher at Wageningen University, first shaped the concept during a decade of work in the Andes region of Chile, Peru, and Bolivia.

Today, the PIP approach has spread beyond Latin America and is being applied in Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and other countries.

'Many development projects fail because they are designed in a top-down way, not rooted in local needs, and people are simply told what to do,' Kessler explains. 'Often, farmers take part only because they receive something in return, not because they truly believe in the process.

'The PIP approach reverses this logic: communities take the lead. By raising awareness and mapping out their future visions, they can articulate what they actually need and plan for the long term.

'This shifts the focus from short-term fixes to sustainable solutions. PIP farmers also become better stewards of their land, understanding that healthy soils are the foundation for the future of their farms.'

'We can also learn a great deal from this approach in the Netherlands,' Kessler reflects. 'Especially the importance of long-term thinking and visualising a shared vision of how our future can be better.

'Here too, we need to cultivate a mentality of working together toward common goals and collective plans. The way the PIP approach fosters that sense of togetherness for a more sustainable future in African countries is something we can certainly draw inspiration from.'

In Uganda, the project is carried out by Common Ground, active in both the eastern and western regions of the country. It is financed by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by Integrated Seed and Sector Development Uganda (ISSD Uganda) and Wageningen Environmental Research (WENR), in collaboration with local partners JESE, AID, Caritas Kabale, and A2N Uganda.

For more information about the PIP approach, visit https://pipapproach.com

Localisation Is Not a Transfer of Tasks, but of Trust

by Eunice Mwaura and Marc Broere

With Lina Alkhawaja (Jordan), Beatrice Gichohi (Kenya), and Amarachi Kalu (Nigeria), Country Leads of the Challenge Fund for Youth Employment (CFYE)

Amarachi Kalu

Localisation has become one of the most overused words in development cooperation. Yet behind the buzz, it often still means local actors doing more with less. In this honest and far-ranging conversation, three Country Leads from the Challenge Fund for Youth Employment (*CFYE*) share what it takes to move from rhetoric to reality.

The first attempt to have this conversation failed. Amarachi Kalu was in the car, caught in Lagos traffic. Beatrice Gichohi was somewhere in the Kenyan countryside, where the internet kept cutting out. We decided to try again.

A week later, the timing finally worked: a warm afternoon in Lagos, an early evening in Nairobi, and a late night in Amman. Three faces appeared on the screen, calm, focused, ready. What followed was a lively discussion about power, ownership, and the kind of learning that only happens when you stop pretending to have all the answers.

'The so-called 'dump and delegate' model is everywhere,' says Lina. 'International organisations talk about localisation, but local actors are rarely given the authority or tools to lead effectively. That is not localisation, that is outsourcing.'

Amarachi nods. 'Often, projects are designed to please donors. Every funder now wants to hear the word 'localisation.' However, too many designs are based on the assumption that what works in Kenya will automatically work in Nigeria. Local staff are given impressive titles but no real authority. On paper, you are the country director; in practice, you are implementing someone else's plan.'

Beatrice adds, 'Solutions are created *for* Africa, not *with* Africans. It is like prescribing medicine before diagnosing the illness. And when local partners are handed projects they were not prepared for, failure is almost built in.'

Lina continues, 'Empowerment is not about handing people responsibilities and disappearing. It is about ensuring they are equipped, trusted, and supported to make decisions. Real localisation requires power-sharing, not project-shifting.'

Beatrice leans forward. 'Many organisations talk about localisation but still cling to control. Donors design the projects, and local staff fill out the templates. The real question is: what do international organisations lose when they truly empower local teams? That fear of losing relevance keeps many headquarters from letting go.'

Being a non-profit does not mean being dependent.

Amarachi agrees. 'Sometimes localisation becomes performance. The local people are visible, but every key decision still runs through headquarters. I once had a colleague resign after being second-guessed by someone thousands of miles away. It was not about ego, it was exhaustion.'

Lina adds, 'True localisation is more cost-effective in the long run. The wrong kind, where you outsource strategy and delivery, is actually more expensive. Empowerment may take time, but it pays off.'

All three Country Leads admit that *CFYE* itself had to learn this lesson. 'In the early days,' says Lina, 'technical assistance was designed centrally in Utrecht and then handed over as a finished product. We learned quickly that it does not work that way.'

Beatrice recalls: 'In Kenya, we once delivered a financial management training to a small, family-run *SME*. European consultants, full of policy frameworks and audit language, designed it. Yet, the business did not even have a finance department. The impact was almost zero. Once we started using local experts who understood informal businesses, family dynamics, and rural realities, things improved immediately.'

Lina nods. 'That is when we realised localisation is not just an *approach;* it is a *commitment*. A commitment means you are willing to share power, listen more, and take joint responsibility for outcomes.'

In Jordan, *CFYE* now begins each partnership with co-creation. 'We hold workshops where companies themselves identify what is holding them back,' Lina explains. 'Sometimes it is something specific, like creating safe workplaces for women in conservative regions. Because these conversations happen in Arabic and in context, the solutions are grounded in reality, not donor assumptions.'

In Kenya, Beatrice describes a cultural shift. 'We have started hiring regional consultants who guide entrepreneurs in their own communities. The feedback from partners has been amazing: *'Now you really understand us.'* What used to feel like supervision now feels like collaboration.'

And Amarachi adds: 'A Dutch partner once said to us, '*You* are closer to the reality, *you* decide.' It was a small gesture, but it changed everything. We could respond faster and adapt to challenges without waiting for approval. The results were better simply because the team felt trusted.'

Amarachi shares an example. 'There is a village where a donor built an 'ultra-modern' public toilet. It had running water and tiles. But nobody had taught the community how to use it. People still defecated on the floor, not out of ignorance, but because they had never used a flush toilet before. The project was abandoned. The donor report said: '*Facility delivered, objective achieved.*' But the real impact? Zero.'

He continues: 'It is the same in economic projects. We talk about 'jobs created,' but five jobs in a rural area with no road or electricity can mean far more than fifty in a city. Without local context, numbers lie.'

Lina Alkhawaja

Lina agrees. 'Every project must start with a real needs assessment. Otherwise, we are just guessing.'

Beatrice nods. 'Even within *CFYE*, we have learned that some targets, like requiring fifty percent women, can clash with cultural realities. At *CFYE*, our general target is to ensure that fifty percent of jobs go to women; however, in practice, we adjust this percentage to local realities. Localisation means adjusting, not applying a single formula everywhere.'

Amarachi laughs. 'For most people in Nigeria, life begins at 30. The UN defines youth as 18 to 35, but at eighteen, you are still in school, and at 25, you are still figuring things out. The people most eager to work are often above 35, with children, with responsibilities.'

'At one training session, two hundred people came. Ninety-eight percent were over 35. Officially, they did not count as youth, but they were the ones who showed up and worked hard. Our partners quietly hired them anyway.'

The days of following Western priorities to secure funding must end.

Challenge Fund for Youth Employment

The Challenge Fund for Youth Employment (*CFYE*) is a programme funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs that aims to create, match and improve decent, sustainable work for young people in Africa and the Middle East.

Now in its final year, the fund operates in 11 countries across the Middle East, North Africa, Sahel and West Africa, and the Horn of Africa, including Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Sudan, Morocco, and the Palestinian Territories. The Fund aims to create a prosperous future for 230,000 young women and men.

CFYE co-invests with local and international businesses to generate lasting employment for youth, especially women. Instead of offering traditional grants, it matches private sector investments and provides targeted technical support to help companies grow responsibly and inclusively.

Each country team adapts the overall Fund strategy to local labour markets, cultures, and challenges, ensuring that solutions truly fit the context. As the programme concludes, its legacy lies not only in the number of jobs generated but in building fairer, more resilient employment systems led by local actors themselves.

Lina smiles. 'A perfect example of why rigid definitions fail. Localisation means flexibility.'

Beatrice adds, 'We saw the same with co-funding. Some small businesses could not match fifty percent of the project costs, but they had huge potential for impact. We now use tiered models, allowing smaller players to join as well. Flexibility makes inclusion possible.'

Why do they think letting go is so hard?

'Localisation challenges power structures,' says Beatrice. 'Take an *NGO* headquartered in the West with a branch office in Kenya. The local office thrives because of the HQ's brand and systems. Once it is strong enough to operate independently, HQ fears losing its purpose. It is not malice, it is self-preservation. But until that fear is addressed, real localisation will not happen.'

However, they do think Western organisations still have a role to play. 'Yes,' says Lina, 'but not the same one. Western organisations bring valuable knowledge and networks. For instance, Jordanian companies in *CFYE's* programme benefit from Dutch expertise in supply chains. But the balance must shift: less overhead, more impact.'

Beatrice agrees. 'The era of big budgets for consultants and expensive hotels is over. Cuts in aid could actually make the system fairer, forcing everyone to measure real outcomes.'

Amarachi adds, 'In Nigeria, we are seeing local development companies emerge, businesses that deliver social impact but are owned and led by Nigerians. The future is not about separation; it is about genuine partnerships built on equality.'

The discussion expands beyond *CFYE*. 'The global aid architecture is outdated,' Lina says. 'It was designed when rich *OECD* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries gave aid to 'the rest.' But seventy-five years later, the world has changed. Middle-income countries have experienced rapid growth, while others continue to struggle with poverty or conflict.

'That creates new dilemmas: global challenges require investment in middle-income countries, but poverty reduction is still needed in the least developed ones. Meanwhile, many people on the receiving end feel uneasy about dependency. Surveys show that two-thirds of Africans would rather pay higher taxes for national development than depend on foreign aid.'

Beatrice nods. 'Exactly. What we are seeing is a necessary transition: from charity to collaboration, from dependency to partnership.'

Amarachi adds, 'Cuts in development aid are forcing innovation. The question is no longer, *'How do we spend more?'* but *'How do we spend smarter?'* That can lead to more equality if local actors are trusted with real responsibility.'

Lina agrees. 'And it is not just about money. It is about mindset. *NGOs* must evolve. Being a non-profit does not mean being dependent. They must become more innovative and take ownership, even take risks. The days of following Western priorities to secure funding must end.'

It is not about giving; it is about co-creating.

Beatrice Gichohi

***CFYE's* private-sector model is part of that** shift. 'With businesses,' Amarachi explains, 'sustainability is built in. We vet their financial capacity and leadership. If they qualify, we are confident that they will continue after the programme ends. When aid flows through ministries, money often disappears. But businesses keep operating and keep employing.'

Lina adds, 'That is why we call it co-investment, not a grant. Both sides contribute. That ensures shared responsibility.'

Beatrice smiles. '*CFYE* has been a learning programme in every sense. Because our country teams manage the projects locally, we can adapt quickly. Kenya and Nigeria are different worlds: flexibility is our secret ingredient.'

'If we really talk about market systems,' Beatrice continues, 'we must look at the entire ecosystem. We have supported individual businesses, yes, but imagine if we addressed ecosystem barriers like infrastructure, regulation, and skills. Then far more people would benefit. It takes longer, but that is how you create sustainable impact.'

Lina adds, 'It is also about changing perceptions. Stop calling people beneficiaries. They are not recipients. They are actors in their own economies. Localisation is not charity; it is collaboration.'

Amarachi nods. 'That is what makes *CFYE* different. It is not about giving; it is about co-creating. That mindset shift is the real innovation.'

As the conversation winds down, we ask: if each of them were the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation for one hour, what would they change?

Amarachi does not hesitate. 'Understand the local context. Talk to people who live with the challenges, not just those who report on them. Solutions must come from the ground up.'

Lina says, 'Give ownership to local actors and, most importantly, learn from failure. Do not just measure success; study the mistakes.'

Beatrice smiles. 'I would take a long-term view. Stop funding short two-year projects. Bring together governments, businesses, and communities. Build ecosystems, not projects. Real development takes time.'

As the call ends, the three faces on the screen relax. There is pride in their voices. '*CFYE* is not perfect,' Lina says, 'but it is a genuine experiment in partnership. We are learning together.'

'I have seen my team grow into leaders,' adds Beatrice. 'People who once hesitated now mentor others. That is a real impact. Not just jobs created, but confidence built.'

And Amarachi, ever pragmatic, concludes: 'Every mistake is a chance to listen better. Localisation is not an end goal; it is the process of finally treating each other as equals.'

Lessons from *WereldOuders'* Family-Centred Approach

Where the *WereldOuders* foundation once supported a single child in an orphanage, it now helps entire groups of children within their own families and communities. However, this system change also brings challenges. How do you bring donors along in such a transformation, and what does it mean for fundraising?

by Benjamin Loman

'**In the past, we worked in what others called an** orphanage,' says director Pauline Lemberger. 'We called it a family home with a surrounding wall. But now we know it is better to support children within their own families, and provide help there.'

That realisation has gradually taken shape within Lemberger and her organisation, *WereldOuders*, over the past few years. We are sitting in the *NGO's* Hilversum office, where for decades the team has been dedicated to improving the lives of children in Latin America.

Founded in 1991 as *Onze Kleine Weeskinderen* (Our Little Orphans), the organisation has since undergone a profound transformation. Its new name reflects its renewed focus: family.

Family in Honduras. Daughters Dafne and Jazmin, after years of not living at home, are now back in their own house with their mother and receive support within their family for school and work.

What/who is WereldOuders?

For over thirty years, WereldOuders has been active in Latin America. Together with their Latin American partner organisation, they have spent three decades pursuing one goal: to give every child the right to a safe home. They support not only children, but also the families in which they grow up. Four pillars form the foundation for expressing their mission: education, healthcare, a safe home, and self-reliance.

The turning point came with one striking fact~~9~~ 5 percent of the children were not orphans. That insight reshaped not only the organisation's approach, but its entire understanding of what true child welfare means.

Family homes, that is how it all began. 'Children received everything they needed: food, education, safety,' Lemberger recalls. Yet the emphasis on family in the name would later prove ironic, as this well-intentioned model had a hidden cost. 'We took children out of their families, out of their communities,' she says, 'and later we saw they could no longer find their place.'

Today, *WereldOuders* supports children in Latin America within their own communities. How did this transformation unfold? 'It actually happened very gradually,' Lemberger reflects. In the shift from family homes to family-based care, several building blocks came together.

An important step in the transition was listening to the children themselves. 'We had many conversations with those who had grown up with us,' she says. 'We asked them: *What did you miss?'* That simple question proved confronting.

'We saw that many children struggled enormously to reintegrate into society,' she recalls. 'We had taken them out of one system and placed them in another~~b~~ ut eventually, they had to return to their own local system.'

Lemberger witnessed this firsthand with a group of six girls in Haiti who, after leaving the family home, began living independently. 'They told us they felt like outsiders, that they could not quite find their place in the community,' she says.

'The six of them lived together in a student house in the middle of a slum; independent, intelligent, with real opportunities. We initially saw that as something positive.' She pauses. 'But precisely because of that, the community saw them as different—even a little outcast. They no longer fully belonged to the world they had come from.'

In these new phases of life, many children found themselves missing their networks~~t~~— he circles of support that had once revolved around the family homes where they had grown up. For Lemberger, this experience reinforced what international research had long made clear: 'a child should grow up in a family.'

With that insight began a period of learning, adjustment, and investment for *WereldOuders*.

Pauline Lemberger

Girl during school lunch. Healthy nutrition is an important building block for a better future.

'We started to focus on sharing knowledge and investing in training,' she explains. 'Together with our colleagues in Latin America, we spent a great deal of time critically examining what is truly best for the child, within the context in which we work.'

A pivotal role in this shift was played by child psychologist Nico van Oudenhoven, and Bep van Sloten, an expert in alternative care. 'We funded that work from the Netherlands,' Lemberger says.

'Nico and Bep began as early as 2016 with training sessions on what defines the best care for both child and family. Each step was small, but together they set real change in motion.' That transition demanded far more than knowledge alone.

'**Such a shift requires courage, time, money,** and communication,' says Lemberger. 'It cost an incredible amount—and not only financially.' She stresses that real change cannot be imposed.

'It had to come from within. That intrinsic motivation within the teams in Latin America was the key,' she explains. 'You cannot enforce this from the outside; it must truly be felt.'

To nurture that shared sense of purpose, Lemberger deliberately invested in relationships with her colleagues in Latin America. 'It was not about convincing them,' she says, 'but about listening, understanding, and genuinely connecting.'

She and her team travelled there several times to engage in open conversations and mutual reflection. But an equally important part of the process, she admits, was the mirror she held up to herself. 'I began to look critically at my own role.'

Gradually, practice began to shift. 'We started working within the community,' she says. The organisation no longer focuses on separate care, but on strengthening the child's existing support network. 'We no longer remove the child from their system,' she explains. 'We leave them within that system, and provide help there, together with the parents.'

The new approach is broader and far more sustainable. 'We now create a tailor-made plan for the entire family,' Lemberger explains. The results are tangible. 'In the past, we helped one child in an orphanage,' she says. 'Now we help ten children within their own community, supported by their own family. The circle has become much larger.'

'A child should grow up in a family.'

What began as a learning process has evolved into a fundamental shift in both mindset and practice; from an organisation that once worked for local communities to one that now works with them.

Substantively, it marks a major step forward. Yet the transition has not been without its challenges. One of the biggest, Lemberger notes, has been communicating this new approach to supporters. Donors often want to see exactly whom they are helping.

'**In the past, you could support a child and** receive a photo and a letter in return,' she explains. 'But in our new model, that is more difficult. Now, donors are supporting a family or even an entire community, and that is much harder to visualise.'

The shift came at a cost. As a result of the new approach, *WereldOuders* lost a number of donors. To make up for this loss, the foundation had to seek alternative sources of funding. 'We became more dependent on capital funds,' Lemberger explains.

Yet this financial setback never led to doubt about the chosen direction. 'We made the right choice,' she says, 'but we should have explained more clearly why we made it.'

Still, the broader fundraising climate remains difficult. Fundraising is under pressure worldwide. Lemberger notes that her organisation has also had to cut costs and 'focus more sharply.' 'In Europe, we have seen revenues stagnate or even decline for several years,' she says.

At times, she admits, she wishes the work were a little less precarious. 'Every day is a challenge. Sometimes I wish we were a bigger organisation with a larger budget and a bit more certainty.'

But amid these challenges, new opportunities are emerging driven by the growing movement toward localisation. Lemberger notes that *WereldOuders* has been proactive in transferring its fundraising expertise to colleagues in Latin America.

Increasingly, funds are now being raised locally~~a~~— development she speaks of with pride, and one that is already bearing fruit.

Two girls on the doorstep of their home in San Vicente de Cañete, Peru, a community supported by WereldOuders.

'Take the Dominican Republic, for example. Half of the budget is now raised locally,' she says optimistically.

At the same time, teams across Latin America are forging new partnerships with the private sector. 'They are working with companies like Makro and local supermarkets that donate food and clothing,' she explains.

But how easily can donors be convinced to fund something as intangible as the transfer of local knowledge? It remains a real dilemma for Lemberger. 'Most of the money goes to manpower; to the salaries of psychologists and social workers who work directly with families,' she explains.

'Yet most donors are moved by tangible things: school or food packages.' Without well-trained professionals, however, long-term development becomes a far more difficult story to sustain.

She points to a recent project in Bolivia as an example. For one month, social workers and psychologists from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru gathered there with a single mission: to share knowledge.

The impact of such exchanges runs deep, strengthening the roots of every country involved, while allowing each to adapt lessons to its own context. 'For fifty children, we need four social workers,' Lemberger sighs.

'But that is the kind of work few people are willing to fund. Those donors exist, but you have to look hard to find them.'

How to Work Locally When Disaster Strikes: Lessons from the Dutch Relief Alliance

James Keah

Text: Elian Yahye

Floods in South Sudan. Typhoons in the Philippines. When disaster hits, it is local organisations who do most of the work and take the greatest risks. The Dutch Relief Alliance is proving that aid can be delivered differently. 'That is the mentality we need.'

For James Keah, effective humanitarian work begins with listening. A seasoned aid worker in South Sudan with the Universal Intervention and Development Organisation (UNIDOR), he spends his days gathering insights from colleagues on the frontlines. 'We are often the first to respond when crises hit,' he says.

And crises have hit hard in the world's youngest nation. Years of armed conflict have displaced millions, while relentless droughts and catastrophic floods have pushed entire communities to the brink. UNIDOR's response stretches across the spectrum—from delivering food and clean water to strengthening health systems and fostering peace.

Keah's organisation partners with the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), a coalition of fourteen Dutch NGOs working with the Dutch government. Since 2022, he has chaired the alliance's Local Advisory Group (LAG), a platform that brings together representatives from crisis-affected countries to advise on how aid can better reflect realities on the ground.

It was through his role on the Local Advisory Group that Keah began to notice a troubling pattern. Some organisations were delivering food, medicine, and shelter in crisis zones—yet had no signed contracts to formalise their work. Others were locked into short-term agreements of just six months.

'Normally, that sort of thing would just slip under the radar,' Keah recalls. 'But as chair of the LAG, I could take it straight to the people who could fix it. It was not that anyone meant harm, the systems just did not talk to each other. You would have local and international groups working in the same country and never even meet. It created a gap that did not need to be there.'

That gap had real consequences: one local partner was abruptly removed from a collaboration without explanation, while another received a short-term contract even as others were granted longer ones. Today, that has changed.

All nine local partners in South Sudan's joint humanitarian programmes now have proper contracts, and communication across organisations has improved dramatically. 'The difference,' says Keah, 'is that we are not just implementers anymore. We are actively involved in thinking and decision-making about the aid that is delivered.'

In 2016, representatives of humanitarian donors and aid organisations gathered in Istanbul for the World Humanitarian Summit, where they committed to a series of reforms known as the *'Grand Bargain.'* One of its key pillars was localisation—putting local organisations at the centre of humanitarian response.

The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) took that commitment seriously. It established the LAG to ensure voices like Keah's influence not just internal alliance decisions but also policy conversations at the highest levels. That investment is bearing fruit.

Each year, the LAG meets with the Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development and the Director General of the Ministry to discuss progress, challenges, and share unfiltered insights from the field. 'It is Dutch taxpayers' money,' Keah says.

'When policymakers hear directly from us, they understand the impact beyond the reports. It builds trust, which is what localisation is about.' Members of the Local Advisory Group do more than advise on contracts—they also sound the alarm on the risks their staff face.

Workayehu Bizu, who heads the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), knows those dangers firsthand. 'As local organisations, we bear the greatest security risks, but often receive the least support,' he says.

During Ethiopia's brutal internal conflict, which raged until 2022 and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, local organisations like his kept delivering aid in active conflict zones. 'Children, women, and the elderly were among the hardest hit,' he recalls.

Aid workers themselves were not spared. One colleague, working with Workayehu, from the Ethiopian Catholic Church Social Development Commission (ECCCSDC) an organisation that was working in collaboration with Cordaid, was killed in the fighting; others in the Amhara region were ambushed and beaten while providing life-saving support.

Workayehu Bizu

'To truly support impactful work, funding must be multi-year, flexible, and cover the real costs of implementation.'

'In those situations, international staff are often far better protected,' Workayehu explains. 'They have strong security policies and budgets. If you work for a UN agency or a big INGO, there is usually a plan to evacuate you. Staff of local organisations did not have that access.'

Workayehu's testimony prompted the DRA to act. In Ethiopia's Joint Response, a new 'risk-sharing' approach was introduced, ensuring that security risks are proportionally shared between local partners, international NGOs, and donors.

‘It is a step forward that we are working on sharing these security risks,’ Workayehu says. ‘For the first time, we are not facing these risks alone. That is a big achievement for DRA.’

For the DRA, another lesson quickly became clear: true localisation is ultimately not about money. ‘At the end of the day, it comes down to who gets to decide on the funding and how it is used,’ says Christel Mulder, the alliance’s chair on behalf of Plan International.

Under the Grand Bargain, donors pledged to send 25 percent of humanitarian budgets directly to local organisations. ‘In 2024, we were already at 42 percent,’ she notes with pride. ‘So, we are ahead of that target. But it is not just about the percentage, it is about the quality of that funding. To truly support impactful work, funding must be multi-year, flexible, and cover the real costs of implementation.’

The rest of the sector lags far behind. A report by Development Initiatives revealed that in 2022, only 1.2 percent of global humanitarian funding actually reached local and national organisations—a fraction of what was promised.

‘Because in the fragile contexts where we work, you can make a plan—but in practice, those plans often change,’

One of the biggest hurdles for local partners is that donor funds are often tightly earmarked for a single purpose. The DRA has broken that mould by allowing local organisations to spend a quarter of their budget at their own discretion. ‘Because in the fragile contexts where we work, you can make a plan—but in practice, those plans often change,’ Mulder explains.

In Ethiopia, for example, part of the Joint Response budget was allocated to build a school with latrines. When it turned out UNICEF had already completed the latrines, the funds were quickly redirected to construct an additional classroom. ‘Normally, that would require navigating layers of bureaucracy and paperwork,’ she explains. ‘But this time it was simple: do what is needed, and fast.’

Donors also often reimburse only the direct costs of local organisations implementing a project. Other needs, such as replacing outdated computers or a good phone connection, are left out. Mulder: ‘We have managed to get indirect costs for local partners reimbursed now as well; that is a breakthrough.’

This way, local organisations working with the DRA have more funds available. ‘In Ethiopia, a local organisation was able to invest in a digital accounting system. That is not a direct project cost, but it is essential to do the work properly.’

Still, flexibility brings its own challenges. Donors are often hesitant, fearing misuse or lack of oversight. ‘But smaller organisations frequently lack the capacity to meet rigid donor requirements,’ she notes.

For example, donors often require external audits, ‘but these are very costly and also divert funds away from service delivery.’ The key question, Mulder says, is how to ensure financial accountability without undermining the independence of local groups. ‘What is needed is real risk-sharing, with donors also accepting that some level of risk is part of the deal.’

The DRA and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been testing a new approach to managing those risks. Traditionally, each actor looks after its own interests: donors protect their funds with strict rules, international NGOs pass those requirements down, and local groups end up carrying the greatest risks, with the least power to influence the terms.

The pilot turned this on its head. In three countries—the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Yemen—donors, international NGOs, and local partners sat down together in workshops to map the biggest risks, from fraud to data breaches.

They compared how each risk affected the different actors and then agreed on practical mitigation steps and shared responsibilities. Some of the solutions were simple but powerful: a shared supplier database to make procurement more transparent, and pooled budgets for staff health insurance. Mulder: ‘This was a critical first step.’

This points to a deeper problem: a lack of trust in local organisations. ‘In our sector, the willingness to take risks is extremely low. Everything has to be tightly controlled, every euro accounted for.’

But she argues that this approach does not make aid more effective, it slows it down. ‘It leads to long delays, endless back-and-forth over contracts, and partnerships that feel more like legal arrangements than real collaboration. One small mistake, and it is treated like a crisis.’

And the results are measurable. A study by The Share Trust on aid delivery in four countries, including Ukraine and Nigeria, found that local organisations work, on average, seventeen percent more efficiently than their international counterparts.

Mulder believes this evidence could mark a turning point for the sector. On a recent visit to Ethiopia, she heard from a local Joint Response partner who had been speaking with other donors.

‘He told them, *‘From the DRA and the Dutch government, I get multi-year contracts and flexible funding.’* The donor replied, *‘If you can prove that, we will adjust our conditions*.’

‘It worked. After showing them the agreements with the DRA, the local organisation successfully negotiated better terms with other donors. ‘That is the power of this approach,’ Mulder says. ‘It does not just improve our own programmes; it helps shift the entire system.’

There are still challenges, she says. ‘The hardest issue is defining roles. Each player brings something different: local groups know the context and access to communities; INGOs can move quickly and operate across countries; and donors set the rules and determine how much risk they are willing to take.’

The challenge, she says, is finding the right mix. ‘How do we balance local expertise, international scale, and donor responsibility to deliver good aid quickly? And that balance shifts depending on the crisis—what works in an acute emergency is not the same as in a long, drawn-out one.’

Another major challenge is speed. In humanitarian crises, every hour counts. ‘In emergencies, speed is key,’ says Mulder. ‘Local partnerships are essential, but selecting partners, assessing their capacity, and setting up contracts can take time. International NGOs often have the systems to respond quickly at scale. The real question is: how do we preserve local leadership without slowing down the response?’

She adds, ‘The DRA works with local networks that are prepared ahead of time, so speed and local ownership can work together. This model has been especially effective in Asia, through programmes like *B-READY* and a focus on anticipatory action.’

When *Typhoon Phanfone* hit the Philippines in late 2019, many families in the coastal town of Salcedo were ready. Thanks to small cash payments given before the storm, based on weather forecasts, they had stocked up on food and moved to safer ground.

The cash grants were part of *B-READY*, a programme focused on ‘anticipatory action.’ Rather than waiting until after the disaster, the programme uses weather models and local networks to provide aid in advance, giving people a chance to prepare.

Early results show that even modest support can transform outcomes. Families used the funds to purchase supplies, reinforce their homes, or pay for transport to evacuation centres. Local officials reported that Salcedo fared far better than in previous typhoons.

This approach is now gaining traction beyond the Philippines, though scaling anticipatory aid remains challenging. It demands highly accurate forecasts, advance agreements with donors, and the political will to release funds before damage is visible.

Still, initiatives like *B-READY* are driving a shift from reactive disaster response to proactive preparedness, Mulder notes.

‘We could easily expand this model,’ she explains, ‘but the challenge is that it requires upfront investment— raining local groups, pre-positioning supplies— nd if the disaster does not strike, that money can look wasted.

‘In times of tight budgets, that is a hard sell. In protracted crises, though, the benefits are much clearer: when you support local leadership directly, you see immediate impact on people’s lives.’

However, involving local organisations in decision-making on a global platform, like the Dutch Relief Alliance, still has its limits, Mulder notes. ‘Our strategy is international, with decisions often covering several countries or contexts. INGOs have an advantage here: with multiple country offices, they can gather insights from different regions more easily.’

Mulder also cautions against the assumption that local organisations speak with a single voice. ‘Perspectives differ widely—within countries and across regions. That diversity is a strength, but it also makes it harder to present one unified position in global policy debates.’

The challenge, she says, is ensuring that local voices have real structural influence rather than just token participation. ‘That is why we are experimenting with new decision-making models through the Local Advisory Group. We are honest about its limits— t does not yet represent every partner, but it is a critical first step.’

Localisation is not only more ethical and cost-effective; it may be key to the survival of humanitarian aid itself. The biggest shock to the sector this year came when U.S. President Donald Trump dismantled USAID. Under the leadership of billionaire Elon Musk, billions of dollars in funding, from HIV programmes to food aid, vanished almost overnight.

The full impact is still unfolding, but researchers at Boston University estimate the cuts have already cost more than three hundred thousand lives. Still, there is a positive side, says James Keah from the local advisory group.

‘When the U.S. suddenly stops funding like that, it exposes just how dependent many countries are on foreign aid,’ he says with a wry smile. ‘Everyone panicked. In Africa, we sometimes forget that foreign taxpayer money will not be there forever. You have to find your own way.’

For Keah, the answer is clear: invest in local organisations that can build capacity and lead their own humanitarian response—organisations resilient enough to stand firm even when global funding dries up.

In South Sudan, he is now preparing a localisation conference. Because of the USAID cuts, localisation has suddenly become a hot topic. ‘If you approach localisation positively, you are not caught off guard by crises. You learn to use your own resources and find creative solutions. That is the mentality we need.’

The Hidden River Beneath The Sand

Mai Chewchew sand river in Tigray, Ethiopia (photo: Pieter van der Zaag)

What if drought and food-security solutions already exist in practice, and science simply needs to listen? That question drives the A4Store project led by Pieter van der Zaag, which explores how Africa's sand rivers sustain small-scale irrigation and climate-resilient farming. Now expanding from Kenya and Ethiopia to Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the project shows how scaling works best when grounded in local, practice-based knowledge. A4Store is part of the Dutch Research Council's (NWO) SDG Research Initiative programme, which supports the upscaling of promising innovations that contribute to inclusive and sustainable development.

by Benjamin Loman

An elephant stands digging in an apparently dry riverbed in Zimbabwe. With its trunk, it sucks up water from the hole it has just dug in the sand. Some distance away, a woman from a local community is doing the same: using a shovel and a bucket to retrieve water from the sand.

'Without water, we cannot live, nature cannot live, and neither can the animals. So, wherever you see greenery, or where you see elephants digging, there must be water,' Van der Zaag says enthusiastically.

The presence of vegetation is an important visual clue: 'Along a sand river, you almost always see beautiful green trees, even after nine months of drought. That is strange, because if you give a plant no water for nine months, it will not survive. So, you know: there must be water underneath.'

Van der Zaag, a professor at *IHE* Delft, only learned around 2008, after already living in Africa for fifteen years, that the so-called sand rivers in southern Africa are not dry at all. 'I learned that from one of my African PhD students,' he says. Local people who have never studied know this perfectly well.'

Many traditional hydrologists, himself included, had walked right past this hidden water for years, literally and figuratively. For him, this discovery was part of a broader shift: learning to see water management differently, with respect for local knowledge.

'Sand rivers that appear very dry are not dry, that is one lesson we had to learn,' he says. 'The other lesson is that irrigation development can be done in a very different way.

What are sand rivers?

Sand rivers carry surface water only during the rains. After the season ends, the water sinks into the thick sandy riverbed, which acts like a natural sponge: storing, filtering, and reducing evaporation. Beneath the dry surface, water can remain for months.

Communities access it by digging shallow wells for drinking, cooking, and irrigation. In remote regions of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, these wells underpin small-scale farming. Farmers often start with bucket irrigation: hauling water from scoop holes to their crops. This labour-intensive method, mostly done by women, is crucial for dry-season food security.

Where possible, some farmers now use small pumps and hoses to deliver water directly to their fields—far more efficient than manual hauling. Researchers like Paolo Saveca have also developed hand-drilled well points that remain reliable even late in the dry season when water tables fall. Built with simple tools for about eighty dollars, they offer a scalable, low-cost upgrade.

Sand rivers need no major infrastructure but depend on generations of local knowledge. Communities know where water accumulates, which spots stay reliable, and how levels shift through the season. Sand rivers are therefore not just hydrological systems, but social ones woven into daily life.

Trained as an irrigation engineer at Wageningen University, he learned the tradition of large-scale water projects: dams, canals, and schemes where hundreds of farmers take turns receiving water. 'That is the conventional way to develop irrigation,' he explains.

'You design a system for, say, a thousand farmers with canals that they have to manage collectively. And then you hope everyone takes water in turn,' he adds with a concerned look.

'In practice, that often goes wrong. People need water when their crops are at risk of drying out, not when the schedule tells them. So, some sneak to the canal at night, and then you get problems and conflict.'

Those experiences contrast with what he and his colleagues now observe at sand rivers. 'Because large collective systems proved so problematic, an alternative form of irrigation development has emerged,' he says. 'It is actually based on what African farmers have always done themselves.'

Instead of introducing large-scale infrastructure from above, water researchers now look at small-scale initiatives that grow from below.

Local farmers have known for generations how to obtain water from the sandy riverbed to irrigate their crops in the dry season, without dams or canals, but with simple tools: a shovel, a small pump, a bucket, and local knowledge that has been passed along for generations about where the water sits beneath the sand.

Van der Zaag became fascinated by this approach. 'Initially, because sand rivers are beautiful and occur where water is relatively scarce,' he says. 'But once you realise there is water in that sand, then water is actually not scarce at all.

'The best part: it does not evaporate. In a reservoir, half the stored water would evaporate, but water in sand remains preserved.' Smiling, he adds: 'It is bizarre, and the funniest thing is that the animals have known this all along!'

This 'other way' of irrigation also requires a different role for water experts. Rather than designing major structures, Van der Zaag and his colleagues now work through action research: testing new ideas directly in the field with local partners and adapting them as they learn.

Local knowledge is not a hurdle but the starting point. 'We are being innovative, but we are swimming against the tide,' he says. Local farmers and their sand-river practices take centre stage, no matter how small their fields.

For Moline Chauruka, a young Zimbabwean water researcher, working at sand rivers is a daily reality. She is completing her PhD on the role of these rivers in small-scale agriculture and has firsthand experience with the practice.

'I always say: farmers are engineers in their own context,' she says. 'As a researcher, you enter a community where farmers have been irrigating their fields for years with water from the sand river. My first task is to understand how they do that.'

Only then, she says, can science contribute something. 'One of our roles as scientists is to listen, to document, and to support local strategies with scientific tools rather than impose outside solutions,' she emphasises.

In her case, this meant using measuring equipment to help farmers determine where in the riverbed the most water is stored. 'Farmers often dig at random. They have to keep moving along the river because they do not know exactly where the best spot is,' she explains.

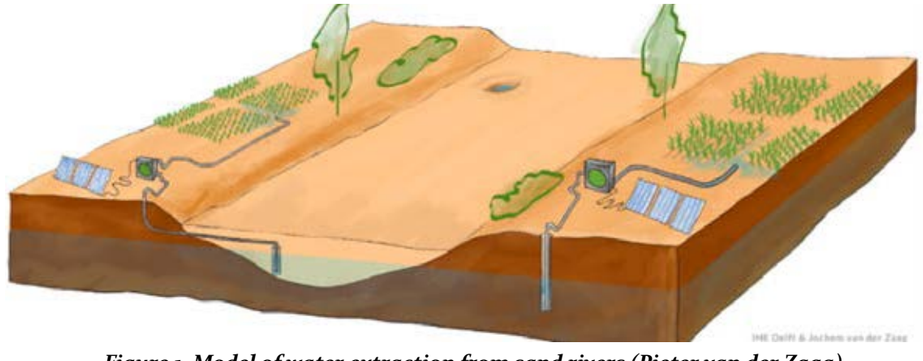


Figure 1. Model of water extraction from sand rivers (Pieter van der Zaag)

Irrigated plot along the Limpopo River in Mozambique (photo: Cesario Cambaza).

'We can help with that scientifically: using simple methods to show them where they can find water year-round.' Such technical support does not change the principle of the sand river but makes the local work more efficient, without taking control away from the community.

Chauruka's work illustrates the interplay between technology and local knowledge. Where high-tech networks or large irrigation pipes are absent, local experience serves as the basis of water management. This 'informal' knowledge is valuable but can be complemented with new tools.

A concrete example is the Shashani riverbed in southern Zimbabwe, where Chauruka worked with farmers. They invested their own resources in sand-river irrigation: digging shallow wells and using buckets or small pumps to bring water to their fields.

She measured how much water the sand contained and how the groundwater flowed. This produced scientific insights but also practical information: where in the riverbed the sand acts as the fullest sponge.

Mozambican hydrologist Paolo Saveca draws similar conclusions. 'In semi-arid areas, you often lack surface water, but nature gives us the sand river,' he says. 'It may look like there is no water, but beneath the sand lies an enormous amount.'

Saveca's PhD research maps how much water these alluvial (sandy) river systems contain and how long communities can rely on them during droughts. Like Chauruka, he works closely with residents. In his study area in Mozambique, there are few official measuring points or pumps.

'But the community already knows that water lies underground,' he says. 'They dig small shallow wells and use that groundwater. I first did fieldwork to map their knowledge, and from that I built the science.'

These examples show a broader trend: academics are no longer just bringing knowledge; they are also gathering it. Saveca summarises it well: 'I am a product of this collaboration.' Over the past decade, he studied and conducted research through partnerships with Dutch institutions.

'All my knowledge came through this North–South collaboration,' he says. But he stresses that it is not a one-way street. His research introduced a new technique for using shallow groundwater in Mozambique.

'It was the first time small farmers here drew water from the alluvial aquifer,' he explains. 'I am proud that I designed those shallow wells. Such knowledge and engagement strengthen the collaboration with the Dutch.'

People collecting water from the Shashani river in Zimbabwe (photo: Pieter van der Zaag)

All three researchers see sand rivers as an example of knowledge flowing in two directions. 'We must recognise that not all solutions that work in the North are suitable for the South,' Chauruka says. 'Sometimes it is not about massive investments or complicated technology but about techniques adapted to local conditions.'

Van der Zaag agrees and notes that the sand-river approach is a nature-based solution: working with nature rather than against it. The water is already in the soil, stored by the sand; therefore, expensive dams are often unnecessary.

Saveca sees such small-scale, climate-resilient solutions succeed across Africa. 'You can apply this in many water-scarce regions,' he says. But he warns that there is no blueprint: each region must adapt the method to its context.

'You need to test and innovate in each river and see how the community responds to changes,' he explains. That is why knowledge sharing is so important, not only from North to South, but also between southern countries themselves.

Saveca is a good example of growing South–South learning. He now trains fellow hydrologists in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

Chauruka thinks even further: the roles of North and South may one day reverse. She recalls her first visit to the Netherlands, where she lived for two years during her Master's programme.

'I come from a country where water is scarce. In the Netherlands, I saw the opposite: a country fighting against water,' she says. 'Climate change brings new challenges everywhere. Who knows, perhaps the Netherlands will one day face severe water shortages.'

In that case, the experiences from Zimbabwe and Mozambique could suddenly become vital for the North. 'The North can learn that resilience does not always come from high-tech infrastructure,' she says. 'Sometimes it comes from simple, low-cost systems that communities already trust.'

Van der Zaag is familiar with that idea. 'Why invest millions in a big irrigation project if you can buy thousands of small pumps for the same money?' That thought captures the ongoing shift in the water sector.

Large infrastructure may be impressive, but the quiet revolution is happening at the local level: at the small wells in the sand, where local knowledge and scientific insight meet. It is precisely there, on the banks of the sand rivers, that innovation takes root, thanks to the people who have lived there for generations, and to researchers willing to learn from them.

Despite the challenges, Chauruka sees the strength of the women in the sand. 'I am so impressed by how women use bucket irrigation to sustain their households,' she says. 'Resilience does not have to come from large projects; this proves that simple means can make a huge difference.'

Still, she dreams of a bit more support: 'If a woman with a bucket doing heavy work can already achieve so much, imagine what she could do with a small pump.' That thought stays with her. 'Each time I meet women at different sand rivers, they inspire me again with what they manage to accomplish despite everything,' she says.

'If we can contribute something externally, without undermining their own initiative, such as offering small pumps or microloans, they could expand their irrigation. That would make a world of difference.'

Mozambican women irrigating crops along the Limpopo River (photo: Pieter van der Zaag)

The women of the sand river

So, who are the people standing in the riverbed every day with buckets and shovels? For Chauruka, the answer is clear: mostly women. 'Most farmers who irrigate with buckets are women,' she says.

'But as soon as a technological improvement appears, like a pump, men suddenly enter the picture and get involved too.' She laughs; the phenomenon fascinates her. 'We do not yet know exactly why it happens,' she says.

'What I see is that women start small. They often have no other income sources, and in our African context, the responsibility of feeding the family falls on their shoulders. So, they use whatever means are available, and those are often the sand river and the bucket.'

In her research, Chauruka has seen how powerful this simple concept is. Women grow vegetables in small gardens and feed their families even in the dry season. At the same time, it is hard work. 'Bucket irrigation is physically very demanding. Maybe that is why men only step in once a motor pump is available,' she jokes.

Lack of technology is not the only barrier to scaling up. Rural women often have less access to financing and information. 'These sand-river systems are in remote, truly rural areas, far from roads and infrastructure,' Chauruka explains.

'Women there could certainly afford a small pump; it is not a huge amount of money, but they are often invisible to government programmes or *NGOs* that introduce such innovations. It is more an issue of access and knowledge than purely money.'

Eunice Mwaura, Co-Founder and Editor-in-chief of Vice Versa Global, during a field engagement in Samburu

When the River Told Me the Truth About Power

Text: Eunice Mwaura

Power is woven into the stories we tell and the voices we choose to amplify. In Africa, narratives have too often been authored from the outside, leaving those who live the realities to watch from the margins. Localisation challenges this dynamic: it asks us to recognise the authority of lived experience, to reframe who holds knowledge, and to understand that telling a story is inseparable from shaping the future it describes.

In April 2018, I stood on a dusty road in northern Kenya, not yet a journalist, not quite a storyteller, but a young African woman carrying the mindset of a finance student who believed every reality could be measured, balanced, or accounted for.

I was there as a translator and transcriber for a Dutch journalist covering a development project named the *Crocodile Jaw*, a title as sharp as its consequences. The project came wrapped in familiar development jargon'— modernisation,' 'transformation,' 'opportunity.' But beneath the glossy pitch lay a far more complex reality.

The plan hinged on diverting water from the Ewaso Nyiro, a river that rises on the slopes of Mount Kenya and threads through vast, arid rangelands. Along its course, it sustains entire ecosystems and underpins the survival of pastoralist communities whose lives are shaped by its every bend and season.

To those communities, a diverted river is not a technical adjustment. It is a violation of the very terms of existence. Water determines migration, food security, cultural practices, and the dignity of living self-reliantly in an unforgiving terrain. Every bend of the Ewaso Nyiro carries memory, meaning, and identity.

As we listened to elders, herders, and mothers resisting the quiet erasure of their futures, and then listened to planners and financiers convinced they were building something 'good', I translated words. Still, something far deeper was being translated inside me.

A question rose quietly and refused to leave: *Why did someone have to fly across continents to tell a story unfolding in our own backyard, in our own languages, among our own people?* I did not yet have the vocabulary to answer it.

But that question became the gateway into understanding an even bigger story, one that has shaped African narratives for generations. In the months after Isiolo, I tried to name the discomfort that had settled in my chest, the tension between who lives a story and who is permitted to tell it.

Around that time, I came across a book titled *Pioneers, Rebels, and a Few Villains: 150 Years of Journalism in Eastern Africa*. One passage stayed with me. It traced the long, complicated legacy of foreign correspondents on the continent, showing how African realities were, for decades, filtered through external lenses.

Sometimes that happened out of necessity; local media were still emerging or constrained by political pressure. However, it often reflected something deeper: a system inherited from an era when African media was not created to amplify African voices, but to manage them.

And here is the truth: we cannot escape it; it is impossible to engage any African theme — politics, culture, economics, or media — without confronting the remnants of colonialism that still shape the contours of our institutions. Media is no exception.

You can still see the residues today: media houses caught between political pressure and donor dependency; journalists fighting to protect editorial independence while navigating chronic underfunding; newsrooms where survival instincts override investigative ambition.

You see it when journalists burn out, not for lack of passion, but because the system around them cannot sustain them. You see it in the uncomfortable truth that, even now, it is often easier for someone from abroad to secure resources to tell African stories than it is for the people living those stories themselves.

But this is not about blame; it is about clarity. It is about recognising the scaffolding behind the silence, and understanding that before we can shift narrative power, we must first acknowledge how that power was constructed.

Why did someone have to fly across continents to tell a story unfolding in our own backyard, in our own languages, among our own people?

After we returned from Isiolo, Marc Broere, the Dutch journalist, and I sat together in a quiet garden on Nairobi's eastern side, reflecting on what we had witnessed: the community concerns, the political undercurrents surrounding the project, and the implications that extended far beyond technical design.

He was no stranger to these terrains. For over twenty years, he had documented stories across Africa, reporting on development interventions, social shifts, and the lived experiences that accompany both. His familiarity with African contexts was not superficial; it had been shaped by decades of engagement.

As we discussed the contradictions of the *Crocodile Jaw project*, development on one hand, dispossession on the other, he paused, considered his words carefully, and then said something that stayed with me long after; *'We need more young African storytellers telling these stories.'*

Coming from someone with his professional history, this was not a symbolic gesture. It was a conclusion shaped by years of observing who tells African stories, whose perspectives dominate public narratives, and whose voices are frequently absent or secondary.

His statement acknowledged a truth that had been forming beneath the surface of our work: that proximity to the story, in terms of its cultural, historical, and linguistic context, fundamentally shapes how that story is understood, framed, and communicated.

In that moment, the dynamic between us began to shift. I understood, more clearly than before, that my role had never been merely technical. As a young African woman, rooted in the context in which these stories unfold, I carried insights that could not be substituted by expertise alone.

The Vice Versa Global Uganda team in action

Over time, that shift became the philosophical and practical foundation upon which we eventually co-founded *Vice Versa Global*.

Vice Versa Global emerged from a growing awareness, borne out of field experience, that the structures through which stories are produced and disseminated required transformation. If narrative power were to shift meaningfully, then the processes and relationships underpinning storytelling would also need to change.

From the outset, localisation became more than a principle; it became the architecture of how we worked. We redesigned our workflow so that those closest to the story led its creation. Editorial authority was intentionally decentralised, distributed in ways that recognised lived expertise as intellectual leadership.

This required deliberate choices. It meant challenging long-standing hierarchies in international and development reporting, where local journalists are too often treated as logistical support rather than co-authors of knowledge.

It meant renegotiating collaborations whenever external expectations threatened editorial integrity. And it meant investing in capacity not as an add-on, but as the foundation of a healthier media ecosystem.

The process has not been without its challenges. Localisation takes time: time to build trust, negotiate power, align standards, and design processes that reflect the communities we serve.

It requires confronting the structural realities of the development and media sectors, where funding and decision-making remain concentrated in institutions far removed from the lives they aim to influence. It requires sustained commitment to equitable partnerships even when systemic pressures push in the opposite direction.

We have learned that narrative power cannot be decentralised if the ecosystem beneath it is fragile. Storytelling, on its own, is insufficient. Shifting power requires institutions that invest in local journalists, honour their expertise, and safeguard their independence.

And it requires an audience capable of recognising the value of locally led storytelling. This audience understands why nuance, context, and lived experience are essential ingredients of development, governance, and social transformation.

And this is precisely where localisation becomes more than an organisational practice; it becomes a way of thinking. Because you cannot centre local storytellers, local journalists, or local communities without also shifting the internal perceptions we hold about our own knowledge systems.

Many of the people shaping policies, managing programmes, and influencing decisions on this continent are Africans. We were born here. We carry the cultures, histories, and sensibilities of our communities within us.

And yet, somewhere along the way, many of us adopted a perception that formal development work must be detached from the very cultural foundations that shaped us. It is this perception that I struggle with the most, because it stands in stark contrast to where many of us come from.

This is a tension I have encountered repeatedly in my work since founding *Vice Versa Global*, because localisation does not only ask institutions to shift; it also asks us, as African practitioners, to remember the value of the knowledge we carry.

I often find myself returning to my own childhood, to evenings where I would insist, relentlessly, that my aunt tell me a story before I slept. She never refused.

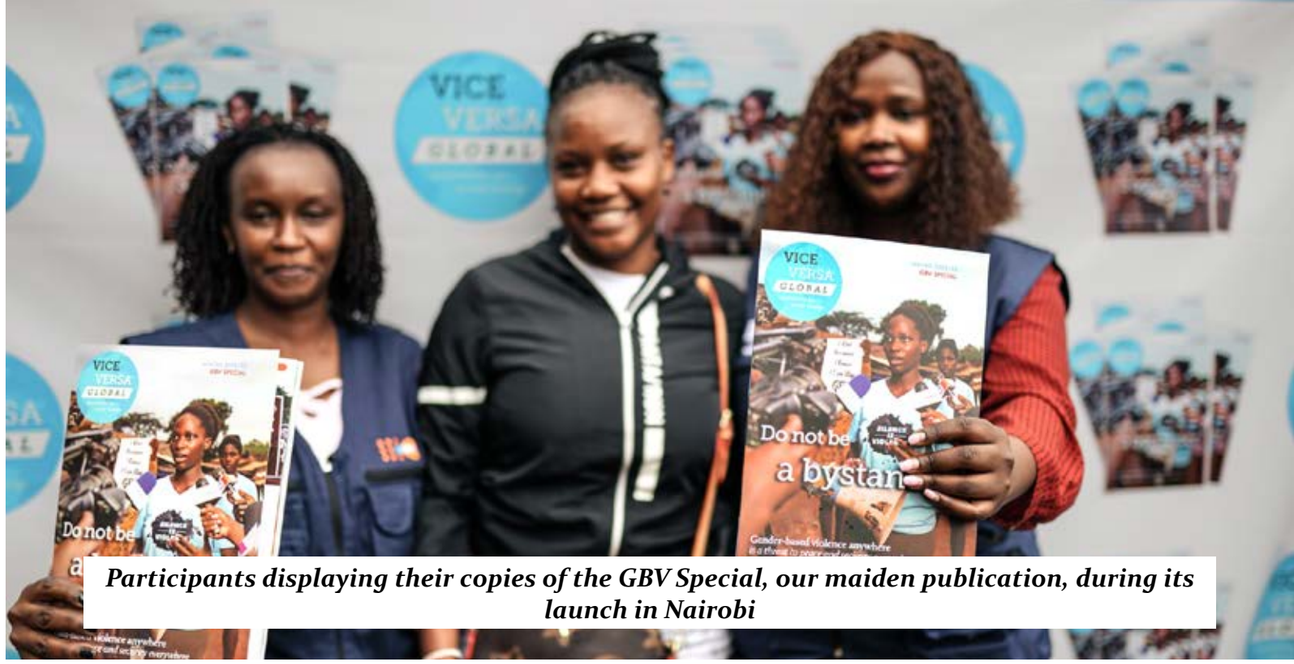
Each night, she offered a tale that explained the world in ways that numbers never could: why the winds changed, why animals behaved as they did, how communities resolved conflict, what it meant to be kind, brave, truthful.

Those stories were not entertainment. They were lessons. They helped me interpret life long before I had the vocabulary to analyse it. They grounded me.

Localisation is not merely about proximity; it is about power.

Storytelling is woven into the DNA of African identity. It has always been our way of organising knowledge, teaching values, interpreting phenomena, and sustaining community memory. It is the foundation upon which many of us learned to navigate life. It is instinctive, familiar, and deeply human.

And yet, when many of us step into the development sector, a field that deals with people, communities, change, and complexity, we



Participants displaying their copies of the GBV Special, our maiden publication, during its launch in Nairobi

rarely see storytelling valued with the seriousness it deserves.

Instead, the sector often prioritises frameworks, indicators, and metrics created elsewhere, as though human experience can only be validated when translated into numbers. In doing so, we inadvertently distance ourselves from the very tools our cultures taught us to trust.

It is a contradiction that becomes even more evident when considering how global perceptions of Africa are formed. Many of the world's dominant narratives about this continent, the sweeping generalisations, the simplified portrayals, the single-story images, have travelled through development reporting.

They have shaped the global imagination because storytelling was treated as something to extract, rather than something to nurture at its source. Writers like Chimamanda have called attention to this danger, but the responsibility stretches far beyond literature. It sits within development communication, policy, programming, and within us.

So, the question is not whether Africans can tell their stories. We always have. The question is why, in the very spaces where stories carry the power to influence systems, shift resources, and humanise impact, African storytelling remains underutilised.

And it is this question, this tension between who we are culturally and who we become professionally, that sits at the centre of the paradox of African storytelling.

As I look back on this journey, I am reminded that reclaiming African narratives is not the work of one organisation or one sector. It is a collective undertaking, one grounded in the understanding that our stories carry insight, history, and possibility.

Across the continent, more African media organisations are stepping forward to strengthen this space, each contributing to a broader shift in how our realities are documented and understood. Vice Versa Global is honoured to stand among them.

What gives me hope is knowing that the path ahead is not solitary. There is a growing recognition that context matters, that lived experience has value, and that the stories we tell, and how we tell them, shape the future we are building.

If we continue to work together with intention and respect, there is no limit to the kind of narrative landscape Africa can create for itself.

At Vice Versa Global, we welcome partnerships with organisations that believe in thoughtful, context-driven storytelling and are committed to grounding their work in the realities of the communities they engage with.

If you are seeking a collaborative approach to communication that values nuance, integrity, and locally led insights, we would be glad to work alongside you.

Together, we can contribute to a stronger, more authentic space for African narratives and ensure they continue to shape the continent's future with clarity and purpose.

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