

# MEETING COMPLEXITY WITH CREATIVITY

## *5 themes in unpacking "local" in aid*

### Background – What is this Document?

In conceiving the [From Where I Stand: unpacking 'local' in aid](#) collaborative learning forum, CDA did not set out to offer a platform about local responses to the current pandemic. Rather, the idea was born out of our long-standing passion for innovative ways to **learn with people at the center of aid**. Offered as a virtual [collaborative learning](#) initiative to bring new insight to the 'localization agenda'<sup>1</sup> in humanitarian or development aid or 'local turn' in peacebuilding, *this series* is an opportunity to blur boundaries of voice and role, location and sector, to seek out leadership perspectives where people are actually leading. The initial group of authors write from [Nepal](#), [Kenya](#), [Haiti](#), [Yemen](#), [Israel](#), the [United Kingdom](#), the [United States](#), plus as a [global team](#), each with years of direct experience in humanitarian response, development assistance and/or peacebuilding. As such, each blog is a rich case study, starting to answer the central collaborative learning question:

***What if the evidence-base for local leadership, aid policy, and INGO practice was instead based on the diverse experiences and ideas of those leading humanitarian, aid, and peacebuilding efforts in their contexts?***

Global reception of the [series](#) is indeed helped by all of us being more 'virtual' in our means of collaboration right now. Across the series we see authors reaching out with a desire to share their expertise that speaks to diverse situations, a courage to question and offer alternatives to policies and systems that define the parameters of their work, and an urgency to get new insights that can help affect positive change in their immediate sphere of control.

In the spirit of the [collaborative learning process](#), this reflection paper kicks off the early analysis of themes and patterns emerging from the initial "case studies" or, for this learning platform, eight blogs. From this analysis process we identified five

#### *Thousands of right things*

*And quoting [Mauricio Lim Miller](#), [Ann Hendrix-Jenkins](#) notes that "to get positive change... outsiders must first recognize that the thousands of right things that people are doing for themselves. Those are the changes most likely to grow and sustain in the long term. The policy makers, non-profits, and funders must learn how to learn from the people themselves." CDA's [Listening Project](#), expressed a similar motivation, all of which points to the need to shift the aid paradigm and place people at the center of the interventions that directly impact their lives.*

*- From page 4*

<sup>1</sup> Initiatives such as, the Grand Bargain and USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education & Environment, Office of Local Sustainability.

emerging threads across the blogs, which are captured below. We invite you to join the conversation through a [short survey](#) and help focus how the [From Where I Stand](#) platform evolves. In the meantime, additional original blogs will continue to be posted weekly and CDA is welcoming new authors (see below about how to share your experience).

## 5 emerging themes in unpacking “local” in aid

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### 1) “We, local leaders”: Voice and who chooses the label

In his personal account, [Paul George](#), calls the question that is a thread throughout the series: **Who is ‘local’?** He transports us across diverse contexts within his native country to explore different understandings and dimensions of the term, how it can be ‘othering’, and why, when unexamined, it can create challenges for agencies and the efficacy of aid efforts.

[Alex Martins’ blog](#) picks up the theme introduced by [Sarah Cechvala](#) in launching this series, to ask whether Covid-19 will finally convince the aid sector that locally led development is vital and what acting equitably looks like, especially for Northern actors. Martin challenges us to *“invert the dynamic of who is considered an ‘expert’ by paying close attention to the power dynamics surrounding who is given a platform to share their ideas, and whose interests are they representing.”*

*“With the expansion of the aid industry across the world, the word ‘local’ has acquired a multitude of meanings, so much so that it can mean nothing and everything without context.”*

– [Paul George](#)

These, and fellow, authors directly or indirectly identify the power of claiming the ‘local’ label, when done authentically and on their own terms. As [Paul George](#) writes, *“when your grandmother counts as one of the IDPs is when you realize that, for the true local, the personal and professional are too close to be untangled.”* Other authors also employ phrases such as *“we (local leaders)”* and *“We, as a locally led organization,”* with rightful pride and confidence of perspective. This is reflective of one dimension of the movement to decolonize development, in which local leadership rejects and [replaces external entities](#) and ideas with those that prioritize diversity, inclusion, and belonging.

### 2) Agency and the (different) lived experience of trust and risk

Viewed from Cite Soleil, a marginalized neighborhood of Haiti’s capital that was hard hit in the 2010 earthquake, authors [Sabina Carlson Robillard and Louino Robillard](#) articulate the complicated legacies of romanticizing and demonizing aid actors, and challenge even widely shared goals of trust and local agency in decision-making. They write, *“it would be taken more or less as a given that internationals can’t be trusted. But it is also not a given that a person or a group can be trusted just because they are ‘local’.”*

Halfway around the world, in Nepal, [Ujjwal Amatya](#) describes a different trust gap revealed during the 2015 Nepal earthquake response. Regardless of whether aid came from international aid agencies, the national government, or local organizations, he observed that *“the voices of affected communities were not taken seriously and their complaints were not considered a high priority.”* This replication of global-

local power dynamics erode trust across many landscapes, and offers an example of the failure to realize what fellow blog author [Ann Hendrix-Jenkins](#) calls, *"the moral and practical imperatives to reorient international aid to respect and leverage the basic human need for self-determination (agency), and its partner, dignity."*

Imposed risk also emerged as a subtle theme across the blog series, and presents an antithetical set of issues to that of trust and accountability. Author perspectives echo recent research by [Interaction and Humanitarian Outcomes](#) about distorted national-international partnership dynamics in high need/high risk contexts, such as when earthquakes strike in already fragile places. **It is a vicious cycle: risk aversion by international actors stresses local groups, resulting in inefficacies for humanitarian response, further constraining the agency of those same groups.** To [Sabina Carlson Robillard and Louino Robillard](#), breaking the cycle requires all external actors to, *"invest in deep context analysis and building relationships... to understand the best role they can play in supporting local responses without reinforcing problematic power imbalances. It will be different everywhere and there are no shortcuts."*

### **3) The "Why" and "How" of greater accountability to communities**

Accountability is as much about the "why" as the "how" as noted by many of the authors.

#### ***"WHY" - Accountability is an underdeveloped source of power for leaders***

Across the series we have seen authors draw a crucial line from greater accountability with communities to more effective local leadership and power structures. For example, [Ujjwal Amatya](#) elegantly positions accountability at the center of what it means to lead. He writes, *"When we hold the power, it should benefit the people... In my journey, I have seen organizations that put the people first... The leaders of these organizations use their power generously and listen to the voices of people, which leads to high-level impact and communities taking ownership of their interventions... For me, accountability means the responsible use of power – at every level, in every organization."*

Writing about her work in [Kenya](#), [Pauline Wambeti](#) asserts several complex, interdependent modalities of accountability, including a sense of accountability to the future and to development outcomes. She writes:

*"It is about taking the leadership journey together with the community... It means ensuring that today's solutions can re-generate and improve in order to solve the problems of tomorrow... It means investing not just in local solutions, but in local leaders... It is about how local communities hold themselves accountable to their development outcomes. It is about facilitating the institutionalization of systems that foster ownership, transparency and accountability. It is about allowing candid dialogues among the local community members. Development without them is not development for them."*

These and other blog authors are adding to the evidence-base about what it takes to **move from principle to practice with regards to community accountability as a way to generate power for local**

leadership. This learning tracks closely with many of the findings from [CDA](#) and the [International Federation of the Red Cross' joint global research](#) on this theme of greater community accountability as essential for effective programs and operations.

### **“How” - “Listen to, and Learn with and from people themselves”**

Continuing with the theme of accountability, blogs also explored the “how” of greater listening to communities as a feature of effective local leadership. Dedication to learning with local people was expressed throughout all entries. For example, [Pauline Wambeti](#) writes, *“I now know the story of development is different for every community. The majority of these practices began as unique ideas of a struggling community that were bold enough to take on their challenges, document their struggles, and celebrate their achievements. When funders impose these ‘best practices’ on other communities, they stifle innovation and creativity.”* And the lesson for herself she notes, *“I have learned that my most important role is to grow as a leader. That it is the only way I can grow other leaders.”*

The importance of taking time to meaningfully listen to and with those which we serve is a salient theme. In her blog, [Ann Hendrix-Jenkins](#) highlights that sustainable outcomes and systemic change comes from meaningfully listening to people. She quotes [Mauricio Lim Miller](#) *“to get positive change... outsiders must first recognize the thousands of right things that people are doing for themselves. Those are the changes most likely to grow and sustain in the long term. The policy-makers, non-profits, and funders must learn how to learn from the people themselves.”* The importance of placing people at the center of the interventions that directly impact their lives is not a new topic for the aid sector. In fact, calls to shift the aid paradigm has been called for by partners and colleagues, and was a critical motivation for CDA’s [Listening Project](#) and its seminal publication: [Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid](#).

### **4) “Systems are where change happens”**

As diverse as the blog authors are, they share a common trait as [systems thinkers](#) - meaning they see the interconnected nature of work, and the need to think about the cumulative impacts of all of our engagements and interventions. [Ann Hendrix-Jenkins](#) celebrates this perspective in her two-part post about what is needed to change mindsets and ways of working to actually achieve the vision of locally led development. As she writes, *“large-scale change happens collectively and socially, which is more than the accumulation of individuals’ behaviors. The evidence from around the world is clear: “systems are where change happens.”*

Interestingly, the complex relationship of systems of governance and aid appear explicitly or implicitly in all of the blogs. For instance, in examining [who is ‘local’](#), [Paul George](#) reminds us of the challenges that the [localization](#) agenda faces in its practical application, particularly with the historical roots of aid derived in the colonial past and the governance that comes with that approach. He writes, *“The colonial tendencies of these states, and power relations with former colonies, shape and directs humanitarian aid to this date.”*

Governance systems are also in the spotlight for the [five colleagues](#) from a consortium of academic and operational organizations, drawing on their global experience connecting community/municipal-

and national-level public health response, including responding to the West Africa Ebola emergency. Their recommendations for urgent, coordinated action to address COVID-19 highlight government limitations and gaps in the international humanitarian aid system's ability to

*"Indeed, right now the real risk is failing to shift power and resources fast enough to respond to growing need at the local level."*  
- [Alex Martins](#)

work effectively with especially sub-national public sector structures, and the unsung [resilience of community systems to act](#). They write, *"Under these extreme conditions, national and local actors are at the forefront of the responses in their own countries."*

Funding systems and structures that seek to ensure greater local ownership also pose questions about governance and more creativity in thinking. Several authors noted that for systematic change to occur across the sector there needs to be an overhaul of funding mechanisms and their intent, direction, and purpose. In her piece, [Alex Martins](#) presents the current moment in context of the robust [global conversation](#) about resourcing local leadership, observing that *"funding flexibly requires a radical rethinking of how the sector views the supposed risks surrounding locally led development."*

Future blogs in this [series](#) will explore place-based philanthropy and other systems relationships relevant to the enabling environment for authentic local leadership such as local networks and the power of [collective impact](#), and dynamics with private sector systems.

## 5) *Implicit bias and Do No Harm*

Power, privilege, and the potent role implicit bias plays in 'localization' emerged as a key issue for authors, and which warrants greater discussion. It remains true that "context matters" when thinking about how to increasingly devolve power to local leaders. A number of authors' point to the countless ways that "localizing" for "localizing" sake can have dramatic and longstanding impacts on the local context and people. Therefore, as [Sabina Carlson Robillard and Louino Robillard note](#), *"It is both right and inevitable that local actors are going to play a bigger role in future. The power dynamics, conflicts, and fault lines that come with that shift will be different in every crisis-affected area. It is not good enough to cut a check to a 'local' group without understanding those dynamics – you may end up [doing more harm than good](#)."*

[Ann Hendrix-Jenkins'](#) discusses this idea of blindly supporting local organizations and terms it *"localization in name only."* She explains that this *"can cause harm by promoting resignation and dependency among those it was supposed to benefit."* And [Paul George](#) reminds us that even *"the degrees of separation between the local actor and communities can lead to a mix of contrasting outcomes, including the highlighting of biases, inequitable distributions, rapid and flexible responses, emergence of hyper-local solutions."*

*"Indeed, INGO headquarters in the developed world have themselves turned into "local" actors responding to the emergency needs that have gripped the societies that traditionally fund humanitarian aid – maybe that will transform ways of thinking and working."*  
- [Paul George](#)

Authors' experiences point to greater application of [Do No Harm framework](#) to the conversation and approaches towards greater local leadership.

## Where to from here?

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If there is an overarching lesson from this [virtual collaborative learning forum](#) to date, it is that there are millions of acts of leadership taking place across every community around the world every day. However, there is a great inequity in who has access to voice their experiences and dictate the advancement of greater local leadership. Finding ways to gain access to critical platforms where their voices can be amplified is an acute challenge for leaders in the Global South. This issue has slowed progress on pernicious global issues such as poverty, conflict, racism, and climate change. These complex challenges demand as much creativity and deeper reflection in so that leaders everywhere can lead from where they stand.

As noted, this reflection paper kicks off the early analysis of what is emerging from the blog series [From Where I Stand: unpacking 'local' in aid](#). As with all our collaborative learning processes, we would like to bring these emerging themes to a consultation with practitioners, experts, and academics - which includes you. In this new virtual form, we are seeking your guidance, thoughts, and feedback about the emerging patterns and in particular their significance, relevance to your work, and greater meaning making about solutions to overcoming some of these challenges.

With that in mind, we ask you to respond to [this short survey](#) to help us advance this collaborative learning process and ensure that we account for the many different voices and perspectives. As you respond to the survey we ask you to consider the following questions as they relate to the five themes explored above:

- *Which of these themes feel the truest from where you stand? Which ring true to your experience and are the most relevant to your work?*
- *What other patterns do you see in the blogs?*
- *Who else has a critical perspective to share from their vantage point of local leadership?*
- *How can the evidence and lessons of this virtual learning forum evolve and contribute to the many robust forums advancing local leadership in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding sector?*

In the coming weeks we will share what we have heard from you. And in light of your suggestions, we will propose ways of moving the learning process forward. This process is an experiment in adapting the proven consultation step of collaborative learning to a virtual platform. Thank you in advance for your willingness to collaborate with us and for sharing your thoughts and feedback. Your input will greatly help us navigate ways forward, and areas of consideration and concern for you. ***We can't wait to see who comes to the table and where we go next!***

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*If you would like to contribute to the "From where I stand" collaborative learning forum please contact [Sarah Cechvala](#), Managing Director, CDA at [scechvala@cdacollaborative.org](mailto:scechvala@cdacollaborative.org)*