

Locally Led Development

It is self-evident that people shape and decide in their own development. Locally led approaches should therefore also be self-evident. Even more so, **it is essential because:**

- Communities have the best **understanding of their own context**: its systems, culture, history, networks, and people as well as the experiences and challenges that come with it.
- Local leaders have **legitimacy and trust from the community**, a credibility that external actors cannot and do not have.
- For **lasting impact**, initiatives must be embedded in existing structures where the community itself bears ownership and responsibility. Only then will communities continue and sustain the work, because it serves their own interests and future.

What is locally led development?

Locally led development means that leadership is rooted in the local context itself. Local leaders who come from the community, know the systems, structures, and dynamics at play, and carry a clear goal and vision for and by the community.

It is about the capacity to identify needs and demands within the community, and to design solutions that respond to them, in a sustainable way, and especially to most marginalised people within the community. It is about the capacity to mobilise people in the community to work toward that shared vision. Change is driven from within, not directed from outside.

Locally led starts with recognising what capacity already exists. It means trusting local priorities, local knowledge, and local leadership - and growing from there, together.

People need to develop themselves, they can never be developed externally. It's the external people [international organisations] that need to believe, not us [grassroots organisations]."

– Malih Ole Kaunga (Founder & Director IMPACT Kenya)

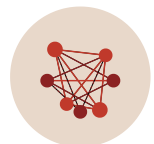
"If you let people identify the need, propose a solution, propose the utilisation of money, this money can bring more solutions than power."

– Gilbert Mututsi Ruturutsa (Founder & Director ADED DR Congo)

Key principles



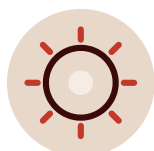
Local ownership: Local actors lead decisions and processes; external partners provide support. Work is carried out by people from the community itself.



Decentralised decision-making: Decision-making happens as close to the people it concerns the most, which includes motivating local governments to take up their role and responsibility.



Embedding in existing structures: strengthen and integrate programmes or initiatives into existing networks, community structures, and government systems. Prevent to build parallel ones.



Start from shared ambition: The vision must come from within. When the agenda is set by funding flows rather than community needs, locally led development becomes locally implemented development in name only.



Support without dependency: Strengthening local knowledge, skills, and resources - catalysing leadership and ownership. Strategy is developed mutually, to strengthen capacity from within. Funding acts as a catalyst.



Build trust through long-term relationships: Local ownership and integration into existing systems cannot be built overnight. It requires mutual trust and shared accountability — and consistent investment in people, organisations, and systems. Therefore: invest in relationships before the programme, during it, and beyond it.

Roles and responsibilities

A locally led approach requires all parties to share the same commitment to placing ownership, decision-making, and leadership with the local stakeholders and community. At the same time, each party has its own distinct role in making this possible. Collaboration means working toward a shared goal with clearly defined responsibilities. Open communication, mutual reflection, and trust are essential throughout.

As funder or supporting organisation: Catalyse and support where needed, rather than control. Make resources and expertise available to facilitate local initiatives. Regularly ask: whose needs does this serve, and whose priorities are steering the direction?

As grassroots organisation: Facilitate and support local leaders and stakeholders to lead from within. Serve community and its stakeholders directly. Facilitate integration into systems and structures. Set priorities, hold ownership, strengthen capacities, and continually ask: are we still driven by community needs, and who holds ownership?

In practice: DRC and Nepal

ADED in DRC started the Tunafasi Programme because Gilbert Mututsi, ADED's director, saw the big need in his community to reach children and youth with disabilities. As they were often excluded and left behind. He visited the DPRP programme in Nepal to learn from their best practices.

This is locally led at its origin. The initiative, the drive, and the vision came from within. External support followed that lead and acted as a catalyse. As Gilbert reflects: “... *when everything comes from above, nothing stays when the external actor leaves.*”



*Photo: Children with and without disabilities in Uvira, Eastern DRC
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What does locally led mean to you?

Locally led development requires honesty, patience, and the willingness to genuinely relinquish control. It demands that external actors critically examine their own assumptions, recognise the knowledge and capacity that already exists within communities, and accept that their role is to support rather than to lead. Only in this way can development cooperation move beyond well-intentioned intervention toward change that is truly owned, shaped, and sustained by the people it concerns most.

Questions worth to reflect on - as an invitation to pause and evaluate what locally led development means in your own work:

1. **What would genuinely locally led look like in your current context** - Not in principle but in practice. What would have to change, and what stands in the way?
2. **In your work, who sets the agenda?** Whose priorities does it reflect? How are they identified and how are they solved?
3. **Where in your work does the balance between leading and following feel most challenging?** What does that tell you?
4. **How would the grassroots organisations you work with describe your role** - and would that align with how you see it?

Want to explore this topic further? We would love to bring these ideas to life in conversation with you. TUNAFASI offers workshops on one, several, or all of the modules in this series.

Contact us: info@tunafasi.com

