ALNAP

# ADVANCING LOCALLY LED EVALUATIONS: PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FOR HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

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ALNAP is the global network for advancing humanitarian learning. Our goal is for all humanitarians to benefit from our sector's collective experience.

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## ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| INGO | international non-governmental organisation |
| M&E | monitoring and evaluation |
| MEAL | monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| RCT | randomised control trial |
| ToR | terms of reference |
| UN | United Nations |
| VOPE | Voluntary Organization for Professionalization of Evaluation |

# INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is widely recognised as a way to learn and to hold humanitarian action to account (ALNAP, 2016). Over time, the field of evaluation has evolved because of criticisms of traditional or classic models that are seen as top-down, quantitative and highly technical (Tapella et al, 2022). Many evaluators are urgently calling for a focus on social justice and equity, as they feel the role and power of local voices in evaluation needs to be re-examined (Mertens, 2009).

> *'Evaluations are invariably top-down and we find that the best of the evaluation material comes from bottom up if that's how the argument and the data collection is built.'*
> *— Mihir Bhatt, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI), India*

In parallel, system-wide initiatives like the Grand Bargain and socio-political movements like Black Lives Matter have created momentum and brought about commitments. Whilst progress on social justice and equity has been frustratingly slow for many, shifts in approaches have been happening. Importantly, concepts like localisation and locally led action[1] have received significant attention, and they have become a priority in the humanitarian sector as both an ethical imperative and a practical reality (Viswanathan, 2023). These concepts have made their way into programming, agency policies and tools, and donor calls for proposals, and they are the object of several evaluations. For example, funding initiatives have become more common that require people closest to crises to influence decisions and lead initiatives that affect them, based on the proposition that this results in more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Alongside these discussions on the need to decolonise and localise aid is a call to re-examine and reframe evaluation practice. Locally led humanitarian action and the growing attention to accountability to populations affected by crisis both support the case that local evaluators are better able to lead community-centred evaluations based on their deeper understanding of local contexts, cultures and values. Yet, our discussions with ALNAP members and other actors indicate that the practice of locally led evaluation is not prioritised or incentivised. This is regardless of the potential for local evaluators to better facilitate access and build trust among those who are central to the evaluation, to handle the complexities of humanitarian settings and to conduct timely evaluations, while also integrating evaluation use across wide ranging stakeholders.

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1 Locally led action is used to denote approaches where programmes are conceived, shaped and delivered closer to the affected communities; designed in accordance with local norms and needs; and which may occur with or without support from the formal international system (Viswanathan, 2023).

*'There's been so much conversation about decolonizing, about localization, but when you actually look at it from a local practitioner's point of view, from us who are doing the evaluations, us doing the research, it doesn't really translate beyond the research papers and beyond the webinars … because at the end of the day, the language is still the same, and the power centers are still the same … maybe the needle has moved, but within the same radius.'*
*— Independent evaluator, Uganda*

Together with who conducts an evaluation, the questions of how and why an evaluation is conducted are of equal importance. Global South[2] evaluators are increasingly advocating for evaluation frameworks and processes that emphasise participatory approaches and that are rooted in local cultures, values and ways of knowing (Reinertsen et al, 2022; Dighe and Matthias, 2023). While we have seen policy efforts such as the United Nations General Assembly resolution on country-led evaluations (UN, 2023) and practical guidance on participatory approaches, these represent only part of locally led evaluations. The discussions we have had with ALNAP members highlight that applying locally grounded evaluation practice creates a more favourable environment for learning and decision-making at the local level and contributes to a community's empowerment and well-being.

The overarching objective of this scoping paper is to raise the visibility and accessibility of locally led evaluation among relevant stakeholders in humanitarian contexts. We hope that it can be more easily applied and recognised as having greater value. The paper summarises the opinions and experiences of evaluation stakeholders captured during informal discussions, interviews and scoping events,[3] as well as evidence from relevant literature. We explore what is meant by locally led evaluation and the principles underpinning it, as well as why, how, and by and for whom evaluations are carried out. More specifically, we suggest how evaluation stakeholders can meaningfully engage with and participate in locally led evaluations.

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2    The terms 'Global South' and 'Global North' are used as a shorthand for low- and middle-income nations and regions that were exploited through colonisation, and the wealthy countries who colonised them or benefited from colonisation. ALNAP acknowledges ongoing debates about the usefulness of these terms, which risk being reductive and binary. When referring to 'Global South evaluators', we mean evaluators working in the Global South (with emphasis on the geography of their work) as well as evaluators indigenous to and working in the Global South (with emphasis on both their identity and the geography of their work).

3    See Annex I: Methodology.

We hope this paper will:

- **enable greater visibility of the work of local evaluators** and demonstrate their case for expanding the use of locally led evaluation approaches
- **support local actors**[4] who are not yet shaping or leading their own evaluation initiatives to position themselves better to access opportunities, and to learn from the experience of other practitioners
- **guide international actors**[5] to provide favourable environments for locally led evaluation by learning how it is practised by others, its value and limitations, and how they can promote and support it without aiming to control it.

Section I explores emerging perspectives on how locally led evaluation is being framed, the principles underpinning this approach and its perceived value. Section II suggests steps to support short-term actions that can be put into practice immediately, as well as longer-term strategies grouped under three themes:

- **Shaping evaluation culture, policies and strategies**;
- **Developing know-how**;
- **Establishing and maintaining critical relationships**.

Finally, we briefly indicate areas for further exploration that emerged from our discussions.

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4    Evaluators or practitioners in civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government authorities who conduct evaluative tasks even if they do not formally hold that title.

5    Commissioners, funders, evaluation managers and evaluators.

# SECTION 1: WHAT IS LOCALLY LED EVALUATION?

Locally led evaluation means different things to different people. It exists on a spectrum, and consequently it can be practised in many ways. The concept is hard to define and highly dependent on contextual adaptations, while evaluation practices can evolve to align closer to, or further away from, the key characteristics of locally led evaluation.

One complexity in understanding locally led evaluation is the subjective definition of 'who is local?'. This leads us to potentially tricky questions over the background and identity of the evaluator. Another complexity surrounds the importance of positioning communities at the centre of, and leading, all efforts that affect them, including evaluation. Definitions may associate locally led evaluation with indigenous ways of knowing, widely documented participatory approaches, or to the values that characterise a local population. Webinar participants understood locally led evaluation to mean approaches that are relevant to and grounded in local realities, and that enable local voices, community engagement, participation and empowerment.

This paper builds on the definition that locally led evaluations clearly indicate ownership by local actors and communities over what is being measured, why and on what terms (Abul Husn, 2023).

A critical feature of locally led evaluations is that local leadership and meaningful involvement of local stakeholders throughout can lead to a strong focus on social justice and equity, grounded in local contexts, values and ways of knowing. Of course, it is also important to note that local evaluators and local leadership within an evaluation will not automatically equate to social justice and equity – local communities have their own deep-rooted power dynamics that can lead to exclusion and power imbalances.

Our conceptual framework for locally led evaluation has three major components (see Figure 1):

1. The **principles** of locally led evaluation are important to understand and uphold. Stakeholders can start by engaging in reflective exercises and discussions, taking time to learn and exchange knowledge with others.

2. **Longer-term strategies** and **immediate actions** are needed for stakeholders to create their own pathways. Stakeholders can take different approaches depending on the resources available to them. Practical steps for longer-term strategies are grouped into topic areas, and more immediate actions are illustrated through examples mapped onto the stages of an evaluation. Stakeholders are invited to take parallel steps both as part of their longer-term plans and in their ongoing and upcoming evaluations, to progress through as many steps as applicable. Practical steps are discussed in Section 2.

3. This framing is completed by linking the **value** of locally led evaluation to humanitarian action and its evaluation stakeholders.

This paper briefly touches on the typical level of involvement, power and influence of evaluation stakeholders. It also looks at evaluation trends and pressures, alongside operational challenges faced when conducting evaluations in humanitarian contexts.

# FRAMEWORK FOR LOCALLY LED EVALUATION

## STAKEHOLDERS

COMMUNITIES

EVALUATORS

COMMISSIONERS

## VALUE

LOCALISED RESULTS

EMPOWERMENT AND WELL-BEING OF COMMUNITIES

MORE ACCOUNTABLE, COST-EFFECTIVE & SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

MORE RELEVANT & MEANINGFUL FINDINGS

LOCAL EVALUATORS BETTER EQUIPPED TO NAVIGATE COMPLEXITY

LEARNING ORIENTED

### PRACTICAL STEPS

LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

SHAPING EVALUATION CULTURE, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

PLANNING

IMPLEMENTATION

REPORTING & USE

ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

DEVELOPING KNOW-HOW

### PRINCIPLES

SELF-REFLECTION

LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

JUSTICE AND EQUITY
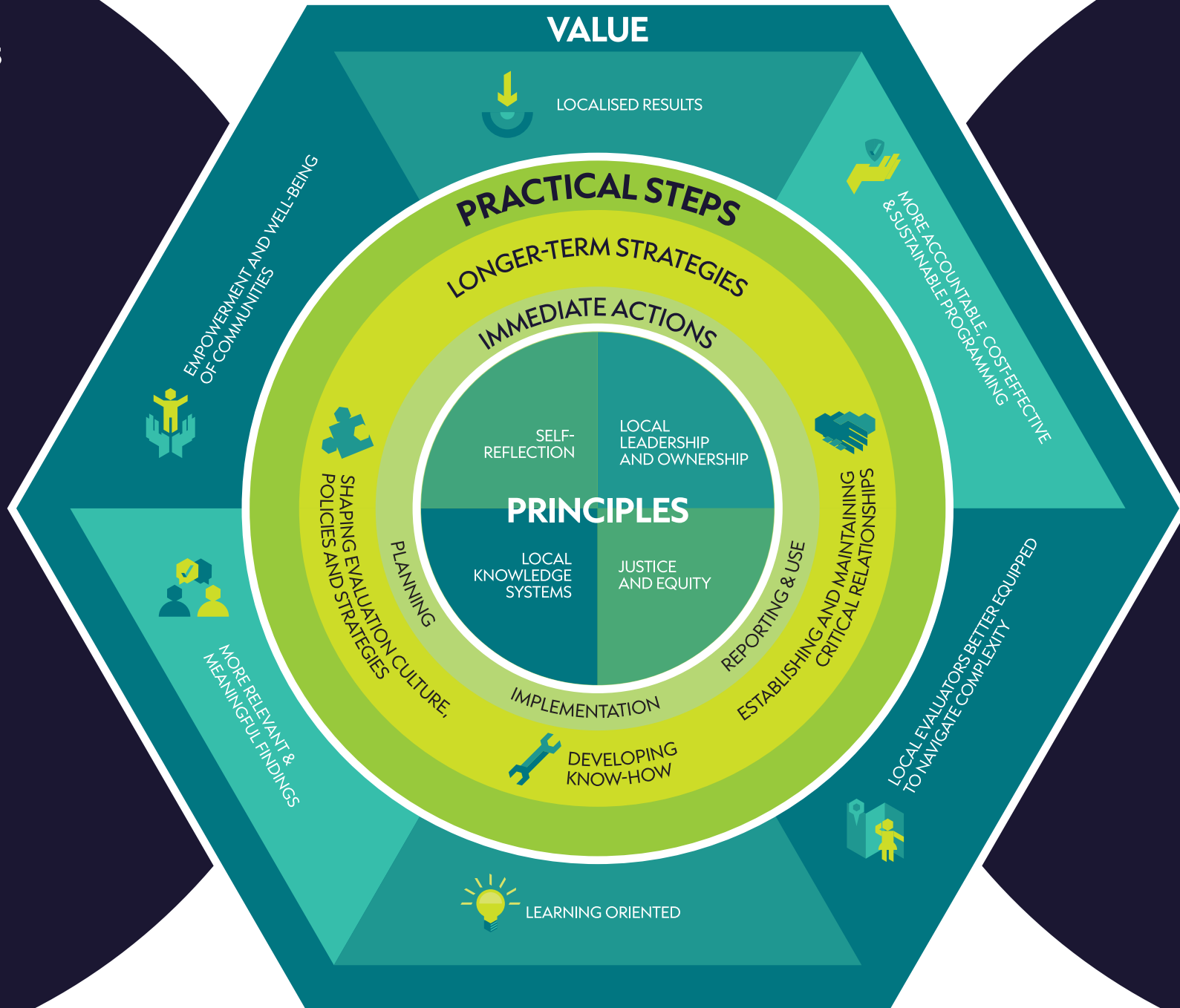
## DEBATES AND BARRIERS TO LOCALLY LED EVALUATION

PREFERENCE OF EVALUATION METHODS

QUALITY AND RIGOUR EXPECTATIONS

REDUCED ACCESS TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS AND LOCAL EVALUATORS

RIGID RECRUITMENT CRITERIA

ETHICAL CONDUCT AND RISK PERCEPTIONS

# IDENTIFYING PRINCIPLES THROUGH CONNECTING THEMES

Traditional evaluation practice is often critiqued because of its historical and epistemological framing, and its association with the Global North. As such, current discourse emphasises the need for a critical reflection on why, how, and by and for whom evaluations are carried out, and a commitment to challenging eurocentric/Western-centric approaches (Chilisa and Mertens, 2021; Backhouse, 2022; Global Change Center et al, 2023; Hassnain, 2023). Global South-driven movements and approaches that seek to reframe evaluation practice are covered extensively in the literature on decolonising evaluation, on culturally responsive evaluations, indigenous evaluations, participatory approaches, community/partner-led approaches, and on equitable knowledge and evidence generation. Key principles and definitions of these connecting themes are detailed in Annex 2.

Common among these connecting themes is their commitment to four principles, which drive our framing of locally led evaluation (see Figure 2 also):

- **Principle 1 – Self-reflection and reflexivity:** Stakeholders (particularly commissioners and evaluators) engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection throughout the evaluation process to critically examine their positionality, assumptions and biases.

- **Principle 2 – Local leadership and ownership:** Local actors define their own goals and priorities and take ownership of the evaluation process and its results.

- **Principle 3 – Local knowledge systems and ways of knowing:** Local knowledge systems and ways of knowing are recognised as valid.

- **Principle 4 – Justice and equity:** The evaluation process promotes justice and equity and allows for meaningful and reciprocal relationships between evaluation stakeholders.



Figure 2: Principles of locally led evaluation

*'... especially when it is about humanitarian or anything on conflict or emergency, the entire world feels that they are doing something good for the people, and in that so called goodness, what takes the back seat is the equity issue ... The discrimination which happens is not highlighted because anyway we are doing good for the people. Discrimination becomes a back seat ... Often the litmus test of a good humanitarian [programme] is lack of discrimination right at that time.'*

*— Pradeep Narayanan, Praxis*

# THE VALUE OF LOCALLY LED EVALUATIONS

The value of locally led evaluation needs to be demonstrated to overcome certain cultural and procedural barriers. A key benefit to all stakeholders is that locally led evaluations tend to be **oriented more towards learning and less towards compliance**. Furthermore, local evaluators are **positioned to navigate complexities based on contextual knowledge:** they can quickly undertake the evaluations required in a humanitarian response due to their location and familiarity with the context. In addition to their personal stake in evaluation use, these factors may even result in greater accountability and a stronger risk-management strategy than reliance on traditional risk-management tools alone.

Locally led evaluations can also lead to **improved outcomes from the evaluation processes**, resulting in more credible, relevant, meaningful and useful evaluation findings for both communities and implementing organisations. They may generate **more effective and localised results** because they encourage greater ownership at a local level, which contributes to a deeper and more culturally relevant understanding of the humanitarian response. In turn, this builds trust between communities and local actors, and the humanitarian programme team.

Finally, locally led evaluations can support **more accountable, cost-effective and sustainable humanitarian programming**. They create channels for voices that are disproportionality excluded, and they contribute to the **empowerment and well-being of communities** (Cram, n.d.).

*'As an evaluation, you have the power to create the first mile in your work. So the first mile should always be those who are often otherwise considered the "last mile". This "last mile" should in fact be the starting point, and then you build your program around that.'*

*— Tarini Shipurkar, Praxis*

# STAKEHOLDERS:
# HOW AND WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?

Evaluation stakeholders[6] play various and sometimes multiple roles across the spectrum of locally led evaluations. A critical assessment of the positionality[7] and power dynamics of stakeholders is key to engage meaningfully in locally led evaluations.

Several models exist for locally led evaluations, with trade-offs or limitations to each. This includes evaluators working as independent consultants; as one-person or larger teams at consulting firms focused on evaluation or research (at national, regional or international levels); and as monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) staff (or some variation of this role) within donor agencies, international NGOs (INGOs), local organisations and United Nations (UN) agencies. Some lead all or specific aspects of an evaluation and associated decisions, while others report to a Global North focal point who has complete oversight. Some work in mixed (local and international) teams with roles that give varying degrees of leadership, or none, to local team members. Finally, some are evaluation managers or commissioners who oversee the work of evaluation consultants or teams. Insights into these evaluator roles reveal typical power dynamics across the evaluation function (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Typical power distribution



● Commissioners
● Evaluators
● Communities

**TYPICAL POWER DISTRIBUTION**

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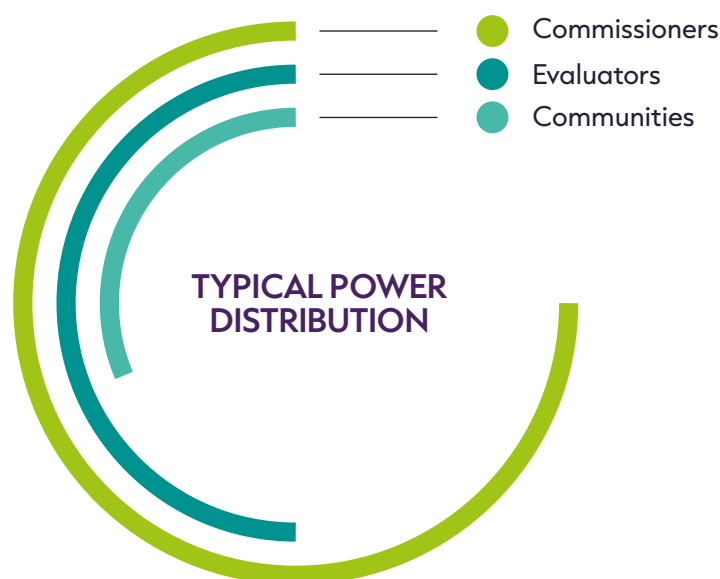
6    In this paper, stakeholders are understood to mean: 1) communities: people affected most by crises and local actors (civil society, national and local non-governmental organisations); and 2) evaluators: those who are local to a community, foreign to a community or in mixed teams of local and foreign evaluators. At times we differentiate between them according to the connection they have to people affected by the evaluation, either as local or international evaluators.

7    An individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context' (Holmes, 2020: 1–10).

*'When we say that we are having equal partnerships, for me the test is very simple. The test is the end of your research. Just think about the whole research exercise that whether there was any part where there was difference of opinion between the international partner and the local partners ... and if in any case the local partners' views prevailed.'*

*— Zaki Ullah, GLOW Consultants, Pakistan*

## Table 1: A typography of evaluation stakeholders

| | Stakeholders | Typical involvement in humanitarian evaluations | Typical level of influence/power over evaluation decisions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Communities** | Communities | Low | None |
| | Local actors | Low | None |
| **Evaluators** | Local evaluators | Low | Low |
| | Non-local evaluators | High | Medium |
| **Commissioners** | Evaluation focal points/managers | High | Medium |
| | Implementing organisations | High | Medium |
| | Donors/funders | High | High |

# SITUATING LOCALLY LED EVALUATIONS IN CURRENT DEBATES AND PRACTICES

It is critical that the discourse around the ethical and practical application of locally led evaluations advances so that commissioning agencies change how they conduct evaluations and who they entrust them to. Resources and time are major obstacles to locally led evaluation, brought on by a lack of prioritisation and incentives, while specific features of humanitarian contexts can make it especially challenging to advance locally led evaluation.

There is a recent trend for **real-time learning** exercises that often apply appreciative inquiry, adaptive management and flexible methods to gather insights (Buchanan-Smith and Morrison-Métois, 2021). Real-time learning tends not to align explicitly with locally led approaches, though there may be huge potential for this as the rise in humanitarian crises calls for faster, more localised learning.  Often, current

practices are not aimed at learning for, or with, local communities or actors. Instead, they tend to focus on the learning priorities of stakeholders within an international organisation at specific phases of an emergency response. Even in cases where a response is focused on one place or region, it is more likely that evaluators are hired from outside that context. For some INGOs, real-time exercises are led internally, using deployments or mixed teams comprising international and local staff. Indeed, there are few examples of these exercises operating through local leadership or for local learning purposes, which could be built upon.

**Impact evaluations** have also gained popularity, addressing concerns around limited theory-based, reliable and high-quality causal evidence to improve the effectiveness of programmes. While impact evaluations for humanitarian action are still rarely used (Puri et al, 2017), organisations like the World Food Programme (WFP) are promoting the approach to generate evidence of their humanitarian programme results and also as a learning tool (WFP, 2022). The use of **randomised control trials** (RCTs) as a methodology to measure impact has also proven valuable in certain sectors and types of interventions, and they have become part of evaluation policy for some donors, INGOs and UN agencies.

At the same time, a number of evaluators, particularly from the Global South, champion **participatory approaches**. These aim to better understand what has happened with an intervention, how it has happened, and how it has led to the results based on people's perceptions and experiences (Cornwall and Aghajanian, 2017). Here, it is important to note that the effective use of participatory approaches in any type of evaluation can be impacted by reduced access to affected populations. This results from weak infrastructure, political barriers and security risks, which are common within many humanitarian contexts.

> *'In areas affected by conflict or instability, security concerns can restrict access to communities and limit the scope of [monitoring and evaluation] activities. Safety risks can also deter evaluators from conducting field visits as secure and safe environments are necessary for conducting thorough and accurate evaluations ... Political unrest, frequent turnover of officials, and instability can severely disrupt MEAL activities. These conditions can create unsafe environments for data collection and limit community participation.'*
> *— Aimen Tayyab, Community World Service Asia*

Regardless of the preferred evaluation method, **quality and rigour** of evidence remain topics of debate among evaluators. With these characteristics in place, 'any method should be able to respond to the four principles [outlined in this paper] and be/come localized' (Fiona Cram, Independent Consultant). Evaluators and researchers have found ways to apply participatory and local ways of designing RCTs to improve their relevance and use — this suggests that the methodology is not the limiting factor to locally led evaluation, but rather how it is applied.

Closely tied to quality and rigour are the **rigid recruitment expectations** of some evaluation stakeholders. While some commissioners require there to be a local member among evaluation teams, preference still tends to be given to those with educational or methodological qualifications and competencies that are not always held by local evaluators. This is true especially for the recruitment of leadership roles, where there is often demand for evaluation experts with extensive experience at the international level, instead of a focus on knowledge and understanding of local contexts and lived experience. Consequently, people recruited locally often fulfil data collection roles and are not given opportunities to contribute to analysis, report writing or dissemination and follow-up activities. Where local evaluators are selected to lead, a single negative experience may influence future recruitment decisions, with a very high bar being set for local applicants.

In some cases, the **restrictive operating context** creates barriers for accessing local evaluators. Examples include the application of sanctions or counter terrorism clauses, which can make it complex to hire local evaluators as leads or as members of evaluation teams.

> *'... [in] Myanmar and Syria, where there's a lot of sanctions, they're using those sanctions to say that they cannot work with local researchers ... how do you work around those sanctions? Like in Myanmar, we can't work with this local researcher because this person cannot receive direct funding from us overseas ... What we are afraid of is that some of these contextual factors are being used to, again, default to those existing relationships, existing behaviors and practices.'*
> *— Key informant[8]*

**Ethical conduct and risk perceptions** also featured in our conversations with key informants. Any evaluator, whether local or international, has a responsibility to uphold ethical norms, including when working with people in vulnerable situations and/or those who are disproportionally excluded (De Mel et al, 2023). However, preconceptions need to be addressed about the ethical conduct of evaluators depending on where they come from, along with how evaluation risk is viewed and mitigated both by evaluators and commissioners. For example, a recruitment situation where the lead (international) evaluator's mitigation plan to address ethical issues was to control the parts of the evaluation that local evaluators would be allowed to conduct.

> *'... we need to look at both sides, this is one of the things that people who come from where I come from, I tell them that we need to be honest also. Why is it that funders and commissioners see it as higher risk when they commission local and national. We need to be able to ask that. Because then we can address the issues and the funders also, they should be able to ask why do you consider it riskier to get a national? ... What do commissioners see as risk and why? And how do the local people view the risk? Because there's some truth to*

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8    In some instances, key informants preferred to remain anonymous.

*it and we have to all agree there's truth to it. We know the issues of corruption, the issues of collusion. They're all those issues because we are human, people are human, and so once we acknowledge those issues exist then we can come to the ethics of being an evaluator. Whether you're national, whether you're local, what are the ethics? So that then when we talk about national, local evaluators, we can say, well, they also should have some level of ethics where then we can all reduce the risk.'*

*— Key informant*

Finally, locally led evaluation is not immune to wider debates on **whether evaluations truly drive change**. While our interviews and discussions have provided insights into the practice of locally led evaluations, there is a lack of documented evidence that demonstrates the value and effectiveness of this practice. Given existing challenges in humanitarian settings and pressures on the evaluation function, it may seem a far-off possibility for relevant stakeholders to engage in locally led evaluation. This may be especially true for people experiencing a humanitarian crisis firsthand, where the related time, energy and costs are too great a barrier to overcome alongside many other pressing priorities. Still, this paper seeks to build on the momentum of locally led humanitarian action, plus learning and experience from topics connected to locally led evaluation, to enable progress for stakeholders. Section 2 offers practical steps.

# SECTION 2: PRACTICAL STEPS TO ADVANCE LOCALLY LED EVALUATION

Stakeholders working to advance a locally led evaluation agenda in humanitarian contexts should consider several enablers (what has worked), barriers (major challenges blocking the way) and practical solutions. In this section, we draw together the reflections from our discussions with evaluation stakeholders to outline **practical steps**. These steps do not form an exhaustive list of what can be done to advance locally led evaluations, they do not need to be followed in a fixed order, and they might not be applicable in every context. However, they can be used as a starting or continuation point to inspire action.

The practical steps are divided into **long-term strategies for the overall evaluation function** (LTS) and more **immediate actions for ongoing or upcoming evaluations**. LTS are grouped under three topics:

- **Shaping evaluation culture, policies and strategies**;
- **Developing know-how**;
- **Establishing and maintaining critical relationships**.

There may be opportunities to use strategies in parallel or across overlapping time periods. Immediate actions are linked to the phases of an evaluation: Planning, Implementation, Dissemination and Use. When working with a community, it is important to decide with them what they consider 'locally led' at every stage.

Points for consideration are offered to three stakeholder groups: 1) Evaluators (with further considerations based on their level of connection to the community); 2) Commissioners, donors, funders and evaluation managers (all grouped as commissioners for simplicity); and 3) Communities (which may include local actors or partners). Stakeholders can start by familiarising themselves with the principles presented in Section 1, and by being open to the potential value that promoting, supporting or undertaking locally led evaluation will bring. From here, stakeholders can select steps according to what is appropriate to their contexts and within their influence or control.

For example, staff from Christian Aid described a clear activity within their MEAL department's control: piloting participatory methods in specific settings where country offices and partners have the capacity and interest to do so (immediate action). This is mostly when working with flexible institutional funding and is informed by a wider and ongoing organisation-wide reflection and commitment to localisation and decolonising evaluation (LTS). Another key informant suggested that once localisation is prioritised at the top, the subsequent trickle-down effect should lead to the development of a localisation strategy and an implementation plan, which then triggers stakeholders to take action and to make changes that will improve localisation in monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

The steps are still relevant and applicable for organisations and stakeholders where broader localisation or locally led humanitarian action strategies do not exist or are in their infancy. This can mean starting with an immediate action that fits best within existing ways of working, or it can mean reflection at an individual or collective level. Attention should be paid to how applying these actions will affect the way that evaluations are planned and conducted, and to what power-sharing with communities and local actors will look like. For example, time may be needed to decide on personal values in relation to locally led work, before they are used as a foundation to guide how an individual applies for and accepts evaluation assignments.

# LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES (LTS)

## 1. SHAPING EVALUATION CULTURE, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Actions relate to strategic commitments, evaluation policies and funding that align with the principles of locally led evaluation.

### A. Make a strategic commitment to locally led evaluations
**Main principle applied: Self-reflection and reflexivity**

'Start building institutional awareness and understanding about the value of localising M&E approaches with organisations you work with as a first step towards cultural change of institutions to accepting and adopting these localised approaches.'

~ **Kathryn Dinn, Independent Consultant, Australia**

**Commissioners and evaluators** can set aside time with leadership to discuss and align strategy on localisation or locally led humanitarian action (where these exist) with the conceptual framework outlined in Section I.

Strategic commitments can include:

- Advocating for evaluations to be intentionally designed to prioritise opportunities for learning at a local level and to minimise the reporting and compliance requirements of humanitarian programming.
- Committing to leverage the experiences and insights of local communities, evaluators, enumerators and staff who are familiar with the relevant cultural and social context.
- Envisioning leadership and visible roles for local evaluators, researchers and civil society partners throughout the evaluation cycle and avoiding tokenistic participation that is limited to answering pre-defined questions or to involvement only after design and criteria are set.
- Setting key performance indicators and targets to track progress on meeting locally led evaluation goals. For example: conducting evaluations with local evaluation experts, conducting listening tours to inform activity design, and Implementing participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Starting the conversation: Consider the 'big E' in M&E, namely independent external evaluations, but also the 'small e' where organisations and donors can discuss resources for rapid reviews or learning-focused evaluations. Here, communities can be part of the decision-making around the focus of the evaluation and can devise the questions that they want answered.

"I think maybe it's in terms of starting the conversation, maybe it's even starting small, like… in monitoring and evaluation, there's the big E, which is your big independent external evaluations and your small E and (…) then this is where organizations have an opportunity to have a conversation with your donor and influence that and say: "look, we would like to do a rapid review or a learning-focused evaluation of some assistance we just provided to 'x' community. Can you give us approval to use the resources so that the community is also part of the evaluation?" Not in that we are collecting data from them but as in they are part of the decision-making around what should be the focus of the evaluation and what are some of the questions that are important to them that they want answered."

**~ Key informant**

**Local evaluators** can spend time understanding the evaluation landscape in their contexts. For example, they can explore who commissions evaluations, for what purpose, and through which channels. Additionally, evaluators can connect to relevant networks (see LTS 3.A) to put themselves in a stronger position to apply for and lead evaluation initiatives.

**Communities** can elect local champions and representatives who can voice their collective concerns and facilitate participation at various stages of an evaluation.

## B. Adapt evaluation policies and practice (regulations, purpose, criteria, quality, recruitment)
**Main principle applied: Local leadership and ownership**

**Commissioners** can build flexibility into their respective evaluation policies, adjusting strict requirements on type of methodology, fixed evaluation criteria, quality and rigour standards, and recruitment guidelines that undermine locally led evaluation.

Adaptation efforts can include:
- Considering how to work in ways that are compatible with locally led evaluation (see, for example, Paul and David, 2024).
- Requiring that each evaluation commissioned justifies how findings will produce value for local communities. For example, insert into policies that, at a minimum, a component should respond to community-driven questions, and that local stakeholders including community members influence evaluation priorities and data needs.
- Examining and adjusting recruitment policies, protocols and terms of reference (ToR) to remove limiting factors for local evaluators. For example, remove requirements for: international experience, a strong command of English and familiarity with approaches or methodologies that are not applicable to the context, unless these requirements are critical to the assignment.
- Ensuring that procurement policies do not favour the same (often international) experts through pre-established connections and ways of working, even when

they are not the most contextually appropriate choice. For example, re-assess the evaluation professionals in existing procurement systems and expand consultant rosters to include local evaluators/firms for all locations where this is possible (see USAID, 2023b).

- Sharing relevant policies and good practice publicly, including examples of locally led evaluations through platforms such as ALNAP's HELP Library.[9]

**Local evaluators, partners and communities** can push back against evaluators and evaluation processes that do not respect local culture and context, and/or do not give community members the opportunity to be involved, influence or lead, where appropriate. They can also utilise feedback and complaints mechanisms to offer insights and in some cases gain insights on evaluation functions.

## C. Provide funding
### Main principle applied: Self-reflection and reflexivity

**Commissioners** can ensure that the necessary budget and time is allocated to hire local evaluators/teams, engage with communities and conduct evaluations with a local lens. This should be given careful consideration, especially if (Global South) local actors and communities are to be engaged more meaningfully in all phases of an evaluation.

Providing adequate funding can include:

- At a minimum, ensuring that dissemination activities that reach communities are built into evaluation plans and are funded.
- Self-reflecting on and addressing any blockages (and the root causes) to providing funding. It is important to recognise that lack of access or lack of allocated resources may in fact be driven by underlying cultural or racial biases, for example, as part of wider discriminatory systems.

> **"If you don't address that power dynamics from the very beginning, acknowledging who needs to be first instead of just putting some justifications like lack of resources, lack of access, etc. In reality, there is lack of resources because that's underpinning discrimination and racism, and because nobody really thought at the beginning how to address that discriminatory system from the start."**
>
> ~ Cecilia Milesi, Global Change Center

- Re-assessing existing procurement mechanisms and internal resources to support locally led evaluations. Equally, reflect on the resources needed internally for commissioning parties to support these processes. Barriers of entry exist for local actors (such as language, capacity, familiarity with application requirements, etc.) that make it difficult for local actors to lead

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9    https://library.alnap.org/help-library

commissioned evaluations. Commissioners should work to remove or reduce these barriers while also ensuring a supportive internal structure for local actors to draw on when leading evaluations.

"We are very supportive of increasing opportunities for local actors to lead evaluations… there are some innate barriers of entry for local actors (such as language, capacity, familiarity with our application requirements, etc.) that currently make it difficult for local actors to lead our commissioned evaluations so we need to brainstorm how to simultaneously lower these barriers while ensuring that we have the necessary supportive internal infrastructure that will allow local actors to succeed in this endeavour."

~ Key informant

"…if you take it seriously, you need to have three interventions with the community, one at ToR stage, one during data collection and then one during validation…  Which evaluations will budget for that? That is a really important question. And you can't really say you're doing decolonial evaluations or decolonial MEL if you cannot fund it. …That limits how many of our programs and projects can actually apply decolonial approaches."

~ Alix Tiernan, Christian Aid

- The planning and setting aside of flexible institutional funding that can be used independently to conduct locally led evaluations, including at the ToR stage, during data collection and during validation.

**Evaluators** can position themselves to better access funding by:
- Taking time to understand commissioners' processes and policies, and to look for opportunities for locally led work.
- Advocating for adequate and appropriate funding through their communications with commissioners. Emphasise (at the application stage) what funding needs to look like to form locally led evaluation teams, to apply context-appropriate approaches and methodologies (see LTS 2.A), and to nurture critical relationships (see LTS 3.A).
- Maintaining an open dialogue with commissioners throughout evaluation processes to discuss, negotiate and adapt partnership terms along with organisational expectations and obligations (e.g., related to due diligence, contract terms, sub-award processes, etc.).
- Seeking out funding for community-led approaches. Examples include the Start Network's smaller grant mechanisms for learning and organisational growth through the Start Fund, and some evaluation associations (see LTS 3).

## 2. DEVELOPING KNOW-HOW

Actions address the knowledge, skills and ways of communicating that can contribute to implementing locally led evaluations.

**A. Apply appropriate evaluation design**
(approaches, criteria, methodologies and tools) for locally led evaluations
**Main principle applied: Local knowledge systems and ways of knowing**

**Commissioners and evaluators** can invest in their own understanding and acceptance of locally led evaluation design. This should not be limited to popular participatory approaches, which can sometimes reinforce power structures and be used in a tokenistic way.

Understanding and accepting locally led evaluation can include:

- Ensuring local communities are involved in the design, implementation and dissemination of evaluations so their perspectives and needs are addressed. For example, consult with communities to identify the top three questions that they would like included in an evaluation.

> **"For CSOs and NGOs, for example, what process can they invest in to get perspectives from communities so that when they have the conversation with the donor, they're saying, look, these are the top three questions that we would like to include in evaluation and we have identified these questions based on a community consultation, for example."**
>
> **~ Key informant**

- Providing a space for co-creation of contextualised evaluation criteria and indicators, where project participants openly explore what they see as important and how they understand change.
- Contributing to and building evidence bases for evaluators to access, learn from and build their own skills. This can also give visibility to and provide advocacy material for locally led evaluation design.
- Adapting approaches to data collection for hard-to-reach areas with consideration given for the most contextually appropriate remote modalities (see resource page).[10]
- Documenting, sharing and promoting community-led MEAL approaches, methodologies and tools (see Start Network, 2023; Sloan, 2024).

**Communities** can communicate traditional ways of knowing and ways of assessing the value of programmes that are best suited to their local context.

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10    https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/themes/monitoring-evaluation-fragile-conflict-affected-violent-settings

## B. Using appropriate language and communication styles
### Main principle applied: Local leadership and ownership

**Commissioners and evaluators** can ensure, at a minimum, that they are using language and communication styles that are known, understood and accepted by local stakeholders.

This can include:

- Hiring evaluators and team members with knowledge of local languages, as well as context and culturally appropriate communication styles.
- Using plain and accessible language, and avoiding the use of humanitarian-specific jargon and terminology.
- Removing English language skills as a recruitment requirement, and as an expectation for most forms of communication in the sector and in the development of guidance and tools. Given the extent of technology available, particularly to commissioners, there is no reason for English to dominate evaluation practice. The burden of understanding or translating outputs that are not written in English should be placed on non-local stakeholders.
- Accepting terminology that is proposed at local level, without censoring or changing the chosen words and meaning.

**Communities** can request that interactions with them during evaluation processes are held in the language within which they feel most comfortable expressing themselves.

## C. Mutual learning and capacity strengthening
### Main principle applied: Local knowledge systems and ways of knowing

**Commissioners** can strengthen their own capacities by learning about locally led evaluation relevant to the contexts within which they commission evaluations. They can also support evaluators in capacity strengthening by:

- Providing opportunities for local evaluators to lead and fulfil substantive roles in evaluation teams.
- Investing in capacity as part of the commissioning process. Initial time and resource investments to work with local evaluators can yield high returns, both in terms of consistently high-quality evaluations plus overall cost savings because evaluators are located in-country and may offer fairer rates.
- Creating mixed (local and international) teams with broad expertise and an emphasis on two-way mentorship to address gaps in local knowledge and skills.
- Familiarising themselves with existing local practices that can be used for evaluation, including context-appropriate participatory approaches and context-specific examples of community- or partner-led M&E.

- Funding research and learning initiatives related to locally led evaluation. Initiatives can enable local evaluators to develop context-specific methodologies and tools, as part of commissioned evaluations.
- Including tailored capacity strengthening for local young and emerging evaluators or local actors (partner staff or community members) to participate in any component of an evaluation, with remuneration for their time and effort.

**Local evaluators** can invest in strengthening capacities that will make them competitive and visible to evaluation commissioners. This can include:

- Learning and teaching peers how to develop and submit competitive bids and proposals.
- Improving and promoting their writing and management capacities to get authorship and leadership roles within evaluation teams.
- Using artificial intelligence (AI) and other technology to support any skills gaps, including for data analysis, writing and translations.

**Communities** can familiarise themselves with evaluation processes by asking questions and seeking information from evaluators as well as programme/project teams. This knowledge will place communities in a better position to influence and lead various aspects of the evaluation process (see Cram, 2021).

# 3. ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Actions enable trust-building and knowledge sharing and provide avenues for meaningful participation through the relationships developed between communities, local actors and the wider evaluation ecosystem.

## A. Community/local actors
### Main principle applied: Justice and equity ⚖️

**Commissioners** can contribute to strengthening these critical relationships by:

- Building relationships ahead of an emergency (not just as a consequence), and by selecting evaluators with pre-established connections with local actors and communities who can lead or play a major role in evaluations.

> **"Don't use the emergency as an excuse to revert to defaults. We've seen really good examples of building relationships before an emergency and that takes time. So very much the same with localization."**
>
> **~ Pamela Combinido, Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)**

- Allocating resources to and building in the requirement for evaluators to spend time establishing or strengthening connections with local actors and communities who will participate in an evaluation.

- Moving away from conventional practices where they (as international stakeholders) control programme design and proposed solutions to creating space for local actors to lead aspects of the evaluation process can result in more effective and relevant outcomes.

**"Embracing an approach free from preconceived notions about aid and philanthropy is essential for building equitable partnerships. This means being open to learning from local communities and allowing them to lead the way. It's crucial to move away from conventional practices where international intermediaries dominate program design, timelines, and solutions. Instead, creating space for local partners to lead fosters more effective and relevant outcomes."**

**~ Michael Vincent Mercado, Center for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, Philippines**

**Evaluators** can form strong relationships or work with team members who have lived experience and existing relationships with communities in relevant contexts.

**Communities** can ask evaluators how much they know about their community and context, and can hold evaluators to account to uphold the learning and interests of the community in the evaluation findings (see Cram, 2021). Where communities are not involved in an evaluation by design, they can ask to participate. Equally, they can refuse to participate where evaluators do not commit to sharing their findings or where the evaluation does not provide learning relevant to the community. `

**B. Strategic collaborations within the evaluation ecosystem (academic, civil society, evaluation associations, local authorities, etc.)**

**Main principle applied: Justice and equity**

**Commissioners** can contribute to local evaluation ecosystems by:
- Supporting the development of National Evaluation Policies (at government level) that aim to strengthen local capacities and competencies in evaluation.
- Sending calls for proposals directly to national and regional evaluation associations.
- Forming relationships with evaluation networks in-country and maintaining open communication to discuss opportunities, align expectations around quality and strengthen capacity.
- Funding evaluation network initiatives, where possible.

**Evaluators** often work in silos, but they can also form or participate in professional networks that contribute to greater coordination, knowledge sharing and leveraging of local expertise. Evaluators can capitalise on strategic collaborations by:
- Participating and investing time in national evaluation associations to raise

their visibility and increase their access to commissioners' calls for proposals. VOPEs can also create opportunities for diaspora or international stakeholders to connect and work with local evaluators (see VOPE Directory)[11]. They have useful resources available. One example is the Ukrainian Evaluation Association's M&E Glossary, plus other evaluation resources in Ukrainian.[12]

- Participating in evaluation communities of practice and conferences, known as Voluntary Organisations for Professionalisation of Evaluation (VOPEs), that support research and learning on locally led evaluation (e.g., the African Evaluation Association, EvalMENA and EvalYouth).[13] These associations sometimes provide related grants (for an example, see APEA, 2024).

- Advocating for local evaluators to lead evaluations commissioned in-country.

- Building the capacity of other national evaluators where possible. Shadow or mentor other evaluators according to level and expertise, particularly in evaluation approaches and methodologies that are culturally/contextually relevant and accepted by communities.

- Connecting to academia, government entities, civil society, the private sector and other evaluators through platforms like LinkedIn. For example, EvalYemen's[14] multi-stakeholder approach has helped mobilise local resources and expertise to address various challenges.

- Building a public list of local evaluators with focus areas, which commissioners can access when seeking certain expertise.

**"Your network is your net worth."**

**~ Key informant**

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11    https://ioce.net/vopes/vope-directory/
12    https://www.ukreval.org/en/%D0%B1%D1%96%D0%B1%D0%BB%D1%96%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0
13    See https://afrea.org/, http://evalmena.org/ and https://evalyouth.org/
14    https://evalyemen.org/

# IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Actions are illustrated through examples and resources mapped onto the stages of an evaluation.

## PLANNING > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > >

### Developing the evaluation ToR and plan

- **Involve communities** in determining the purpose and learning objectives of an evaluation. Form reference groups or invite community representatives to participate in planning before or at an appropriate phase in a humanitarian response.
- **Write ToRs with local language requirements.** Specify that an evaluation must include **a local actor and/or evaluation team member who is fluent in the local language.** Be flexible, adjusting the terms with a locally led lens at inception and other critical points of the evaluation (see ACFID, 2023 for an example consultant ToR).
- **Allocate funds to co-design and plan for dissemination activities with communities** (see Hassnain, 2021). Ask evaluators to describe how they will do this within their proposals.
- **Consider the timings of evaluation processes to enable communities to engage in data collection and dissemination.**
- **Form a 'connected' team** with member(s) who share culture and/or language etc. with local actors and communities (including those who may already have pre-established relationships).

### Designing the evaluation

- **Critically examine** the questions, criteria and value systems that guide an evaluation, the approaches and methodology to be used, and the level of local (and community) participation/ownership.
- **Discuss and adapt expectations** around rigour and how to include participatory methods (see Apgar et al, 2024).
- **Implement approaches and methodologies** that are appropriate to the context and locally led. Document the experience and share it widely with others (see, for example, Low et al, 2023; Sloan, 2024).
- **Make time to get frequent feedback** and adapt the evaluation design based on contextual changes.

## IMPLEMENTATION > > > > > >

### Data collection and analysis

- **Spend time in local communities** (where possible) to get to know the people affected by a crisis/humanitarian programme or use appropriate technology and communication channels to enable dialogue.
- **Involve local actors and communities**, leveraging language skills and context-appropriate communication styles throughout implementation.
- **Include two-way capacity-strengthening** between international and local evaluators, communities and commissioners throughout the evaluation process, as applicable.
- **Create opportunities** for local knowledge- and insight sharing, including through sensemaking or validation workshops, in order to understand findings in culturally and contextually responsive ways (see Meenenga, 2023).

## REPORTING & USE > > >

### Report writing and outputs

- **Share authorship** with local counterparts and make efforts to enhance the visibility of their organisations.
- **Tailor outputs** to multiple audiences (including through different formats, tailored content and languages).

### Dissemination

- **Invite local evaluation team members, organisations or actors to lead dissemination event**s and provide practitioner insights wherever possible.
- **Involve communities in dissemination plans**, ask them who should be invited, where and in what form they want to learn about findings (see HAG et al, 2024a).

# CONCLUSIONS

Locally led evaluation exists on a spectrum. Evaluations can be locally led to different degrees, depending on how they are conducted, by whom and for what purpose. We can advance efforts by recognising the potential value of locally led evaluations and by aligning our evaluations with their underlying principles. We can be bold in adopting approaches in the long and short term that will create positive change.

Evaluation stakeholders must build on the significant momentum that exists around localisation and locally led humanitarian action initiatives, and be proactive in moving away from restrictive evaluation expectations and requirements. Such traditional approaches determine what counts as evaluative evidence, what is important to know, and what constitutes 'quality' evidence.

Evaluation stakeholders can start this transition by using the ideas and insights captured in this paper to debate, reflect on and invest in new approaches or to adapt their existing ways of working. We have presented practical examples and resources that can be integrated into longer-term strategies, and shorter-term actions for upcoming and ongoing evaluations. We invite readers to:

1. **Use the long-term strategies and short-term actions in your practice and send us feedback (alnap@alnap.org).** This work is continuously evolving, and we recognise that our framework may require adaptations as examples of good practice in the humanitarian sector gain visibility.
2. **Share locally led evaluations you conduct or come across publicly.** ALNAP's HELP Library[15] is an ideal platform for this.
3. **Participate in relevant evaluation and learning fora at the national, regional and international levels** (see LTS 3b) to collect and share examples of practice and experience related to advancing locally led evaluation.

Our conversations with ALNAP members and other stakeholders have illuminated **topics for further exploration:**

- Does AI offer the potential to level the playing field in access to evaluation work? How can AI be leveraged by local practitioners and for locally led evaluations?
- What steps need to be taken by local evaluators and commissioners to address concerns around ethics, quality and risk?
- What is the role of local authorities and leaders in advancing locally led evaluations?

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15    https://library.alnap.org/help-library

# ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

This paper is the result of a scoping phase during which we conducted a review of existing literature (including beyond the humanitarian sector). It draws primarily on 27 key informant interviews, and conversations with ALNAP members and its wider audience. These discussions took place via a scoping webinar with ALNAP's M&E community of practice and a webinar during gLOCAL Evaluation Week 2024 (a week of evaluation knowledge-sharing events that connects people globally),[16] to check if our findings resonated with others and have the potential to create value.

The aim is to document different perspectives on locally led evaluation in humanitarian contexts and identify connections between locally led evaluation and similar themes. Building on stakeholder/member perspectives and connections, the paper offers a framing through which to understand and apply aspects of locally led evaluation by stakeholder type. More specifically, we identify how to engage and participate meaningfully in locally led evaluations, answering:

- **What is locally led evaluation?**
- **How can practitioners conduct or support locally led evaluation in humanitarian contexts?**
- **What actionable insights, recommendations and resources on locally led evaluation apply to practitioners working in humanitarian contexts?**

The focus of this paper is locally led evaluation, though the original research question was formulated around both monitoring and evaluation. Noting the importance of monitoring, after initial findings and iterations of the research, we decided to narrow the scope to recognise the specific expertise and processes of each functional area. However, we still believe parts of this paper are applicable to readers interested in locally led monitoring.

We aimed to document more examples of current practice. Yet early findings from a rapid literature review and key informant interviews showed us that locally led evaluations in humanitarian contexts are not widely published, and therefore a different methodology would be required to conduct a full review of existing practices and approaches.

In selecting respondents for semi-structured key informant interviews, we considered: affiliation, gender, location and representation of Global South/North, ALNAP membership and non-membership, context focus (development or humanitarian), topic expertise (published research or article on a related topic), or an intended user of the scoping paper.

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16    https://alnap.org/about/events-listing/glocal-2024-from-roadblocks-to-roadmaps-navigating-the-enablers-and-barriers-to-advancing-locally-led-and-community-engaged-evaluation-in-humanitarian-contexts/

We also recognise our own positionality in writing this paper. Hana is based in Italy and is of Lebanese origin. Mae is from the Philippines, where she also lives. We are both evaluators and researchers who have worked on programmes in our home countries and internationally.

| | Type of stakeholder | # of people |
|---|---|---|
| **Evaluators** | Development consulting companies (CoLAB, GLOW consultants) and social enterprises (Global Change Center, Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG), Samuel Hall) | 6 |
| | Independent consultants | 6 |
| | Local non-profit or NGO (All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI), Center for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, COAST Foundation, Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices) | 5 |
| | Evaluation associations (African Evaluation Association (AfrEa), EvalIndigenous, EvalYemen, International Evaluation Academy, Pakistan Evaluation Association, Ukrainian Evaluation Association) | 5 |
| **Commissioners and/or Evaluators** | INGOs (Christian Aid, Community World Service Asia) and UN agency (World Food Programme) | 3 |
| **Commissioners** | Donor (United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or funder (Start Network) | 2 |
| | **TOTAL** | **27** |

## LIMITATIONS

This scoping paper focuses on evaluations in humanitarian contexts though the literature references development, humanitarian and peace-building settings. Three key stakeholder groups (evaluators, commissioners and communities) are central to our framing of locally led evaluation. We did not carry out any interviews with communities, though we have included them in the practical steps based on references within the literature and the experiences of evaluation stakeholders. Key informants could choose to respond to our questions via email interview or via a brief video call. While this allowed for greater flexibility and reach, it also created some inconsistencies in the level of detail received, including our ability to draw out richer examples and probe further on some questions. The sub-question on examples of locally led humanitarian evaluations was limited to open access resources and required a different methodology than planned.

*Advancing locally led evaluations: Practical insights for humanitarian contexts*

# ANNEX 2: CONNECTING THEMES

| Connecting themes | Description | Specific focus | Resources |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Decolonising evaluation** | 'Decolonising evaluation means proactively including the world views, practices and experiences of the formerly colonised. It may also mean problematising the concepts with which we work, for example development and gender, and exploring how these concepts are understood and experienced in different contexts.' (Backhouse, 2022: 9) | Shifts in power and access; recognition of historical/colonial inequities and power imbalances | Backhouse (2022)<br><br>Global Change Center et al (2023)<br><br>Hassnain (2023) |
| **Culturally responsive evaluations/ culturally responsive indigenous evaluations** | 'Culturally responsive evaluation is broadly defined as an evaluation approach that "recognizes that demographic, sociopolitical, and contextual dimensions, locations, perspectives, and characteristics of culture matter fundamentally in evaluation" (Hopson, 2009: p. 4), where lived experiences help to (re) define and (re)interpret evaluation outcomes.' (Kushnier et al, 2023) | Respect for culture, cultural diversity and traditions; recognition of traditional or indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing | Chilisa and Mertens (2021)<br><br>Kushnier et al (2023) |

| Connecting themes | Description | Specific focus | Resources |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Participatory/ community/ partner-led approaches** | 'In a participatory evaluation, the parties involved in the project decide what will be evaluated, with what objectives, when the evaluation will be conducted, what data collection and analysis methods will be used, and how the results will be communicated.' (Tapella et al, 2022: 24) | Participation and ownership of communities | Reinertsen et al (2022)<br><br>Tapella et al (2022)<br><br>Meenenga (2023) |
| **Equitable knowledge and evidence generation** | 'Humanitarian sector priorities, decisions and actions are led by and value the diversity of local expertise and knowledge in order to better address needs of affected populations.' (working definition, HAG et al, 2024b) | Equitable and inclusive approaches in knowledge and evidence generation in humanitarian settings | HAG et al (2022a)<br><br>HAG et al (2022b) |

# ANNEX 3: ENABLERS AND BARRIERS TO LOCALLY LED EVALUATION

The following enablers and barriers to locally led evaluation were shared by evaluation stakeholders. Our findings are grouped into overarching themes. These insights have driven our framing of locally led evaluation, particularly the practical steps in Section II. The first set includes major enablers like the involvement and commitment of leaders, commissioners and organisations; existing relationships with communities; the presence of evaluation associations; as well as access to guidance, tools and training. The barriers mentioned most frequently and ranked as the most challenging are resource limitations, evaluations driven by non-local agendas and the priorities of commissioning agencies, and limited community engagement. The explanatory notes provide further insights on how to interpret the thematic groups that resulted from our analysis.

| Table 1: Enablers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
| --- | --- |
| **Involvement and commitment of leaders, commissioners and wider organisations** | Level of leaders' commitment to and advocacy for locally led evaluation. Willingness of evaluation commissioners to understand and accept locally led evaluation, including sharing power equally with communities. Local institutions, governmental and non-governmental organisations, which support locally led evaluation through funding, policy, coordination, information sharing and logistical assistance. |
| **Presence of evaluation associations/ professional and qualified local evaluators** | National evaluation associations that promote locally led evaluation and form a network of evaluation professionals who contribute to greater coordination, knowledge sharing and leveraging of local expertise. |
| **Documented guidance, tools and training on non-traditional evaluation approaches and methodologies** | Evidence bases for evaluators to learn from and build their own skills, which can also be used to advocate for evaluation commissioners to support approaches such as culturally responsive evaluation. Adapting approaches to data collection for hard-to-reach areas. |
| **A focus on evaluation purpose/findings serving community stakeholders** | Including a focus on project participants in the purpose of evaluations — how findings can help their communities. |

| Table 1: Enablers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
|---|---|
| **Local involvement in evaluation phases (including requiring local evaluators in ToRs)** | Throughout the evaluation cycle, promoting a larger role for local researchers and civil society partners and involving project participants in evaluation design. In addition, providing an open space for co-creation of evaluation criteria and questions, where project participants openly explore what they see as important and how they understand change. This avoids tokenistic participation. Leveraging the experiences and insights of local communities, evaluators, enumerators and staff members who are familiar with the cultural and social context. Making sure the local communities are involved in the design and implementation of evaluation processes, including dissemination, to ensure their perspectives and needs are addressed. Actively involving community members in every stage of the M&E process has proven highly effective. This engagement fosters trust, ensures cultural relevance and enhances the accuracy of the data collected. |
| **Tailored training** | Tailored training and remuneration for data collectors, and the involvement of staff who are trained in participatory approaches. Two-way capacity-building as a focus. This involves not only enhancing local researchers' skills but also shifting power dynamics to allow for genuine local ownership of the evaluation process. Such approaches help avoid externally driven and extractive methodologies, fostering a more inclusive and empowering environment for local researchers and communities. Providing continuous capacity-building opportunities, including resources to local M&E teams (working in partner countries) to enhance their skills and knowledge, thereby improving the quality and effectiveness of M&E activities. A thorough understanding of the priorities and operations of community organisations is crucial. Partnering with local organisations can become significantly more meaningful and enriching if national and international NGOs fully comprehend the capacities and resources these local partners possess. For example, monitoring visits can be much more impactful for partner organisations if the insights gained from these reports are used to enhance their implementation strategies rather than merely assessing the value of the donors' money. This approach ensures that the focus is on strengthening the capacities of local organisations and on filling in a gap when needed. |
| **Collaboration with diverse stakeholders** | Such as academia, government entities, civil society and the private sector. A multi-stakeholder approach has helped mobilise local resources and expertise to address M&E challenges. |

| Table 1: Enablers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
|---|---|
| **Funding and flexibility** | Flexible institutional funding, alongside donors willing to fund community-led approaches. Re-imagining partnerships is fundamental to support effective community-led change. Working with institutional donors requires understanding and an ability to navigate through their processes and policies whilst also advocating for community-based actions. Maintaining open communication and dialogue to discuss and negotiate partnership terms and organisational expectations and obligations (due diligence, contract terms, sub-award processes, etc.). |

| Table 2: Barriers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
|---|---|
| **Resource limitations** | Limited budgets and time given for evaluations, and the rapidly changing situation are seen as a barrier to hiring local evaluators into mixed teams. Consideration is needed for this if local (Global South) partners are to be engaged more meaningfully in all phases of an evaluation. Additional resource barriers include road infrastructure, lack of power and ICT technology, and weak data systems, particularly for remote and hard-to-access areas where mobile networks and internet access is limited or non-existent. |
| **Driven by non-local agenda and priorities** | Most published works are Global North to Global North partnerships. Willingness (or awareness) is lacking for evaluation commissioners to relinquish power in M&E processes so these can be truly locally led. Donor indicators are standardised and not contextualised. Top-down evaluations miss out recommendations and insights from the communities. Externally driven evaluation questions are designed in response to rigid donor requirements/expectations or outside criteria. Donors go as far as to tell you how to do it, providing a template with limited flexibility to include community voices. International intermediaries fall back on conventional methods (controlling design and implementation), stifling autonomy, creativity, capacity for leadership and innovation by local organisations. |

| Table 2: Barriers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
|---|---|
| **Limited engagement with communities** | Engagement with communities is extractive. Findings are not brought back to communities. Local champions are scarce. Dissemination with communities is not well funded. Even when participatory methodologies are used, project stakeholders only participate after assessment criteria are set. Their involvement is limited to answering pre-defined questions. Security concerns make it difficult to reach certain regions/populations, limiting the scope of M&E activities and deterring evaluators from field visits. Environments are unsafe for data collection (i.e., involving female staff in Afghanistan). |
| **Language** | The specific humanitarian system jargon and terminology used is a barrier, as is the use of English as a requirement for work and as an expectation for most communication in the sector, and in the development of guidance and tools. Humanitarian staff lack knowledge of local languages and communication styles should be given more consideration. Funders are put off by certain terminology (which is deemed appropriate at local level) and sanitise language used (i.e., instead of ideologies and social movements, using 'worldview' and 'opinions'). |
| **Appropriateness of tools, methodologies and approaches** | When evaluations are not developed locally, the things we are looking for or that we may think are important might not be important to communities affected by crisis. Practical guidance is lacking, (i.e., on community-led M&E). MEL can be incompatible (in terms of duration) with addressing human suffering. Challenges exist in defining metrics for good participation and for creating non-linear characteristics of a programme, so proxy indicators are used that attempt to measure and judge an entire programme with one indicator. Management styles and processes are relied on that are deeply rooted in Global North values that do not align with cultural and operational contexts. |
| **Upward accountability** | Evaluations are seen as donor reporting exercises instead of opportunities for learning. Compliance is the main purpose. External entities often conduct third-party monitoring, collecting extensive data without making it publicly available. This undermines transparency and accountability, limiting the potential for local stakeholders to benefit from or utilise the data for their own analysis and follow-up actions. Ineffective compliance requirements are not relevant or add little value, and they divert resources from substantive community-driven outcomes. |

| Table 2: Barriers | Explanatory notes extracted from key informant interviews |
|---|---|
| **Access to evaluation work** | Commissioners often require international experts (sometimes written into evaluation policies), with many years of experience or international experience. Contracting practice differs by country. The default is to recruit based on personal relationships and established connections, and to use existing ways of working. Local researchers are often given the role and responsibility of data collection but do not participate in analysis or in follow-up post reporting. |
| **Local capacities** | Capacity is limited to place bids, with low understanding of what constitutes a bid and how to submit a proposal. Writing capacity can be low at a local level (and the types of evaluation phases evaluators are involved in depends on the capacities available). Excessive focus is placed on building capacities as opposed to shifting power and allowing complete ownership. For example, regional representatives have complained that numerous organisations have conducted capacity-strengthening initiatives but that they need to be more targeted and have an end date. Growth must be recognised and supported. |
| **Local authorities' engagement/use of evaluations** | Conflict disrupts governance structures and weakens institutions responsible for M&E. There is limited capacity for data collection and management (poor data infrastructure and inconsistent data) in some contexts. |
| **Lack of coordination** | Coordination can be poor among donors and on initiatives funded. Fragmentation during conflict makes it difficult to coordinate and harmonise M&E efforts across different sectors and organisations. |

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