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DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION DIRECTORATE

Framing DAC member approaches to enabling locally led development

This discussion paper aims to facilitate reflection as part of a Development Assistance Committee (DAC) peer learning exercise on locally led development. It serves as a basis for informal discussions with development stakeholders. It will help shape the peer learning work and feed into the final products of the exercise. It will be revised throughout the learning process. It can be read in conjunction with the “Concept note for the peer learning exercise” [[DCD/DAC\(2023\)5](#)], which details the rationale and governance for the exercise as well as links with other work conducted by the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate. A first draft was discussed during the 2023 DAC Civil Society days. This draft was last updated in October 2023.

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1. Context

Promoting locally led development for effective development co-operation is not new. It draws from the push for participatory approaches dating back to the 1970s, the Aid Effectiveness Agenda's ownership principle from the early 2000s, and the evolution towards development effectiveness and a people-driven 2030 Agenda, as well as the subsequent [Grand Bargain localisation commitments](#) in 2016. More strategic and political rationales have recently rekindled interest in locally led development. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, and the growing number of crises and geopolitical considerations have disrupted traditional development co-operation delivery models and highlighted the importance of increased effectiveness and local relevance. At the same time, critical voices against racism and colonisation in development co-operation have highlighted the pressing need to address the power imbalances that impede local leadership, ownership and legitimacy. The latest developments include the endorsement by 18 development co-operation providers of a [statement supporting locally led development](#) in 2022.

Development, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors, including DAC members, do not always share the same understanding of locally led development and its implications on development co-operation, humanitarian support and peacebuilding activities. Systemic constraints and sensitive political and power dynamics require a shared understanding of the challenges at stake, collective solutions and more contextualised responses if genuine development progress is to be made.

In early January 2023, the DAC, therefore, agreed to carry out a peer learning exercise to share and learn from peer approaches to support locally led development [[DCD/DAC\(2023\)5](#)]. The objective of this paper is to frame the peer learning process by providing conceptual clarity around the following issues:

- Establish a broad working definition¹ for what it means to support locally led development and what is understood by local, for the purposes of this peer learning exercise.
- Develop a working conceptual framework of different dimensions of locally led development co-operation.
- Identify contextual parameters through which locally led development may be shaped.
- Test the application of the conceptual framework to different instruments, interventions and approaches.

¹ These working definitions are neither agreed upon nor adopted but allow for the peer learning work to begin to test and frame the subsequent work.

Given the intricacy of development, humanitarian and peace challenges, the peer learning exercise will address these three dimensions of international co-operation. For simplicity, they will be implied under the term “development co-operation”.

The peer learning is not prescriptive. It aims to encourage exchange, debate among development partners and within institutions and, most importantly, learning, which can lead to better practices to support locally led development co-operation. Any normative work – around principles, ways of working and measurement criteria – will be developed after the learning work and subject to DAC agreement. The current framing is designed to elicit comment, challenge and debate, not to present a comprehensive analysis of current approaches.

There is a breadth of existing definitions

There is no standard definition of what locally led development is. However, many actors, especially within civil society and the humanitarian assistance sector, have drafted their own definitions, notably building on the principles and commitments made by humanitarian stakeholders as part of the [Grand Bargain](#). Most of the existing definitions refer to localisation rather than locally led development and address how or why partners will adapt their assistance to enable or support locally led development.

Box 1. Selection of common definitions of localisation and locally led development (non-exhaustive)

- Localisation is understood as shifting decision making, resources, power, capacity and project/programme management to local partners (including national and local governments, and/or national and local civil society organisations) (Global Affairs Canada, 2023^[1]).
- Localisation is a method to drive more effective development outcomes by improving the agency of affected people and local actors (including partner governments) so that development action is locally informed, locally led and meets the needs of local people (DFAT, n.d.^[2]).
- Locally led development is the process in which local actors – encompassing individuals, communities, networks, organisations, private entities and governments – set their own agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality (USAID, 2022^[3]).
- Localisation is initiatives and organisations “owned and led by people in their own context. It includes small-scale grassroots initiatives, as well as activities undertaken on a wider scale” (Peace Direct, 2022^[4]).
- Localisation is a process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner (Oxfam, 2021^[5]).
- Localising humanitarian response is a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action to better address the needs of affected populations and prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses (OECD, 2017^[6]).
- Localisation is a process of recognising, respecting, and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by local and national actors to support the interests and well-being of the populations and communities in question (Care, 2016^[7]).

- Localisation refers to channelling aid to recipient country entities. These entities might be public (ministries, parliament, accountability bodies and local government) or private (civil society organisations, media, non-governmental organisations and the for-profit sector) (ODI, 2012^[8]).
- Localisation is a process to increase the leadership and authority of local and national actors in determining how local, national and international resources are used within their communities to address their priorities (Save the Children, n.d.^[9]).

Localisation is a process of changing the way support to communities is designed, funded and delivered, where local response systems have the agency and resources they require to support communities before, during and after crises (NEAR, 2018^[10]).

There is no shared understanding of who is local

There is no shared understanding of the parameters for locally led development, including what and who are local and representative. Some definitions of local actor used in development co-operation include:

- An individual or organisation that is legally organised under the laws of the country receiving assistance, has its principal place of business or operations in the country receiving assistance, is majority owned by individuals who are citizens or lawful permanent residents of the country receiving assistance, is managed by a governing body, the majority of whom are citizens or lawful permanent residents of the country receiving assistance (USAID, 2020^[11]).
- Actors based in the Global South and not affiliated in any way to an international non-governmental organisation. It is present in locations; accountable to local laws; accountable to communities where they work; led by local nationals, and not internationally affiliated in terms of branding, governance, or financing results from affiliation (NEAR, 2018^[10]).

The diversity of understanding of what should be considered as local also reflects the debate and tensions around the role and responsibilities of national and “more” local actors in development co-operation.

2. A conceptual framework for supporting the process of locally led development

Working definitions

The peer learning exercise will centre on how development co-operation can support locally led development to ensure a broad analysis and emphasis on the agency of local stakeholders. The working definitions used for the peer learning review are described below:

- **Local actors:** individuals, businesses, communities, institutions and governments based and operating within the local context of reference, comprising citizens or lawful residents subject to local laws, and are centred on local communities.²

² Most local actors are based in the local context, but there are some complex contexts (e.g. Syrian Arab Republic) where some local actors have had to relocate.

Box 2. Local actors include: grassroots associations, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations that are locally founded, government (national and subnational entities), parliaments, traditional and spiritual leaders, academia, media, and the private sector. They can include regional organisations, confederations, coalitions and networks if member organisations maintain independent fundraising and governance systems.³

- **Localisation:** the process of transforming DAC member and intermediary partner **policy, institutional arrangements, systems and practice** to enable locally led development co-operation.
- **Locally led development co-operation:** development co-operation that supports locally led development by recognising and enabling local actors' agency in: **framing; design; delivery**, including control over resources; and **accountability**, in given local and operating contexts.
- **Locally led development:** an ongoing development process where local actors have agency in framing, designing, delivering (including control over funding), accounting for and learning, with or without the support of international development co-operation.

The scope of who is considered local will be refined during the peer learning exercise and might include a spectrum of what is considered local in different contexts. The key aspect of this definition is that government (national and subnational) entities and regional organisations and networks can be considered to be local in this exercise.

Four dimensions of agency in development co-operation

While not aiming at being comprehensive, the four dimensions of agency presented in the working definition can help structure a reflection on the agency of local stakeholders in DAC member approaches. More precisely, the conceptual framing asks the following questions:

Table 1. Four dimensions of agency in development co-operation

What is the agency of the different local stakeholders in			
Framing	Design	Delivery	Accountability
Priorities: identifying challenges and needs and setting priorities	Strategies and programmes: designing and adapting strategies and programmes	Funding: accessing flexible and sustained funding and controlling use	Locus: defining the lines of accountability and learning
Standards: setting guiding principles and standards for accountability and learning	Mechanisms: designing partnership and collaboration mechanisms	Implementation: selecting processes, procedures, practices; choosing delivery systems (e.g. financial, auditing, procurement); and managing implementation	Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL): developing frameworks, and selecting, producing and sharing evidence, etc.

³ Excluded from this definition are internationally affiliated organisations (through inter-linked financing, contracting, governance and/or decision-making systems), international non-governmental organisations (non-governmental organisations carrying out operations in one or more aid recipient countries), multilateral organisations and international private sector organisations (organisations that are not based in an aid recipient country and carrying out operations in one or more aid recipient countries).

A spectrum of shifts in agency

The rationale for enabling locally led development co-operation is grounded in instrumental, normative and emancipatory justifications (Vij, 2023^[12]). Recognising these justifications and acknowledging that enabling locally led development is a process of shifting agency dynamics in specific contexts, the peer learning will look at these efforts through a spectrum (Table 2). The spectrum ranges from omitting local actors to local actors taking prime responsibility for framing, design, delivery, accountability and learning.

The objective of the spectrum is to enable a more granular and operational understanding of local stakeholders' agency, different stakeholders' expectations (local and development co-operation providers), where blockages or conflicting objectives remain and how the role of different stakeholders should evolve. The spectrum is reductionist and serves to think through this shift in agency across different approaches and interventions. It is not normative and does not negate potential diverging interests, objectives and values between providers and partners or internal and external political barriers. For instance, the peer learning exercise will look at critical nuances, including "agency for whom?" (i.e. which local actors, including marginalised groups).

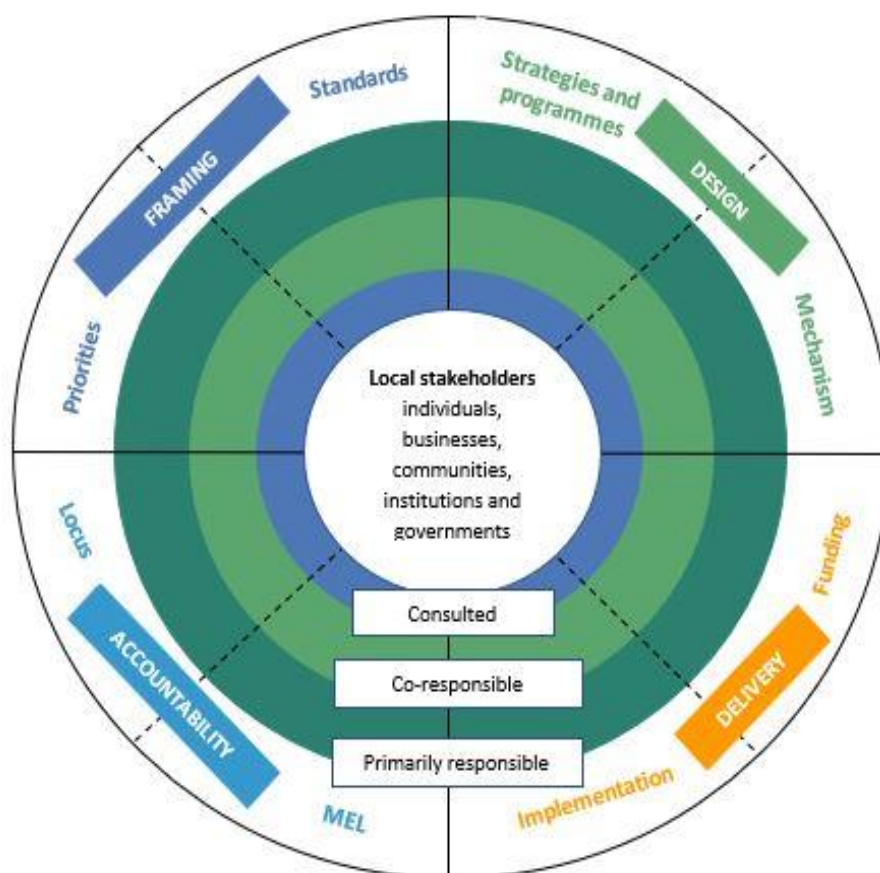
Table 2. A spectrum of local actor agency

OMITTED	CONSULTED	CO-RESPONSIBLE	PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE
Local actors are unaware of opportunities for engagement and support (i.e. funding). Providers do not share information or set up consultation mechanisms.	Local actors receive timely information on policies/strategies/programmes and engage in dialogue after consultation with their own constituents. Providers allow space for timely and effective engagement and commit to consider the views expressed.	Local actors are part of a formal system and processes to either take decisions jointly with the provider or independently within an agreed framework.	Local actors take decisions and actions independently. Providers recognise and value local actors' decisions.

A compass for understanding and analysing locally led development

Applying the spectrum to the four dimensions of agency in development practice can help better understand and assess the extent to which DAC member approaches enable or constrain locally led development and identify concrete ways forward, as well as the implications of the degree of agency on the partnership (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Compass for understanding agency across different approaches



Notably, the spectrum does not imply that responsibility in all four dimensions of agency should sit with local actors in all circumstances (framing, design, delivery, accountability). For instance:

- The degree of agency in one dimension can have implications on the other two dimensions. In particular, the degree of agency in delivery can directly impact expectations in terms of local stakeholders' agency in accountability. Many stakeholders also consider that direct access and control over funding are prerequisites for effective agency.
- Within inclusive and equitable partnerships, collective accountability might be more desirable than handing over agency to one group of local stakeholders or the previous concepts of mutual accountability.

Beyond operations, this conceptual framing aims to explore how local knowledge, values and expertise are valued and mobilised and where bottlenecks remain. By looking at a diverse range of local stakeholders, it also aims to guide reflection on potential unintended consequences of more locally led development on the different local actions on countries' national and subnational systems and misalignment with national priorities/strategies, including the risk of undermining one type of system while overloading others, fragmented development co-operation, and the challenge of scaling local interventions and contributing to sustainable systemic change.

3. The enabling environment: Key institutional and contextual parameters for locally led development

At least two key parameters influence DAC members' approach in their development co-operation and the extent to which it enables locally led development. The first is the DAC member's (or another provider's) domestic and political/socio-economic context. The second is the local context (country, regional, local, international) in which the intervention takes place. The relationship between these frequently determines the approach DAC members take. The peer learning exercise will address these parameters through two methodological approaches: DAC member case studies and country deep dives.

DAC member political and socio-economic contexts and institutional arrangements

Political contexts, systems and institutional arrangements underpin all DAC members' principles, strategies, operations and funding instruments. There is significant heterogeneity in these and in the political importance placed on locally led development.

The broader geopolitical position, member history and the values it places on governments versus individuals, attitude to decolonising development and humanitarian assistance, and tackling institutional racism, vary greatly between members. Together with political and diplomatic considerations and accountability expectations from citizens, they can lead to different rationale and approaches to development co-operation and support to locally led development. The peer learning will be an opportunity to reflect on how the DAC member's domestic context enables or constrains locally led development co-operation and will help understand how political discourse, including narratives around development co-operation, as well as accountability to taxpayers, could affect levels of commitment and approaches to locally led development co-operation.

In addition to different conceptual approaches to locally led development, policies, systems and institutional arrangements also underpin all DAC members' strategies and operations (Figure 2). Members' institutional integration, level of country presence and delegation of authority, mechanisms for programming, performance management and accountability, risk appetites and policies, funding instruments, procurement methods, compliance and safeguarding mechanisms, and staff capacities also influence the range of tools at their disposal as they seek to operationalise locally led development co-operation across their portfolios. For instance, members with the flexibility to think through the different types of risks and opportunities that might come with expanding their pool of partners and sufficient staff capacity might be more inclined to partner with local civil society organisations (CSOs) than with international or DAC country CSOs, or with partner country government institutions than with multilaterals. Similarly, organisations with strong results systems are more able to engage in various partnerships and adapt to different contexts, which are needed to promote locally led development. Policies, institutional arrangements, funding and management systems also have a direct impact on local partners, be it in risks they can pose (minimising costs to be competitive, low overheads) or barriers they create (resource-intensive compliance regulations).

Figure 2. Understanding DAC member foundational enablers*



* These are based on the foundational components of analysis in the DAC Peer Review Methodology.

Recognising these contexts is critical to identifying which blockages members need to address, where there is a margin of manoeuvre, quick wins and the need for more systemic change. The DAC member deep dives aim to understand DAC member contexts, constraints and opportunities for supporting locally led development.

Local operating contexts influence decisions

An equal focus on local contexts is critical to address how DAC member efforts to support locally led development co-operation can interact with local contextual dynamics, including power dynamics that create the risk of reinforcing existing forms of socio-economic or political marginalisation.

Factors around the country context (type of regime, openness of civic space, inclusiveness, values, fragility, geography (e.g. small island developing states, land-locked countries, etc.), level of economic development, diplomatic relations, etc.) shape the nature, scope and magnitude of locally led approaches. How these interact with the DAC members' structures, policies and politics determines the types of partnerships that can be built, the sectors of engagement and the selection of delivery modalities within sectors. Capacity considerations and the degree of aligning values can be key variables to drive the nature of locally led development – and the “choice” of partners. Understanding how power imbalances and dynamics exist and persist between local actors is an important step in building politically conscious and inclusive ways of working.

Recognising that local contexts influence approaches to locally led development, the country deep dives provide an opportunity to explore this variation, and the differentiated approaches which are subsequently taken by DAC members. A dedicated thematic deep dive on supporting locally led development in politically constrained environments will also help build this understanding.

4. Understanding the landscape of DAC member funding approaches and opportunities for more locally led development co-operation

Most DAC members have no formal definition or policy on locally led development, but some are committed to pay more attention to local contexts

Most DAC members have not defined a specific policy or standard definition of locally led development or locally led development co-operation. Only a handful of countries have formal or internal policies or definitions. Those that do tend to have also developed additional guidelines and tools to support staff in understanding the operational implications of the move towards locally led development co-operation.

DAC members who have recently revised their overarching strategic framework do reflect on principles linked to locally led development. In addition to common references to the effectiveness agenda, recent strategies and policy frameworks reflect on the importance of inclusion, particularly regarding the importance of engaging more with youth, women and local CSOs while not necessarily committing explicitly to support greater local leadership. While not consistently labelled as such, some members are also actively engaged in co-creation when designing their country strategy and/or specific interventions. However, documenting these approaches and capturing their implications sometimes proves challenging.

Still, only a limited number of members openly link locally led development to the challenges around power dynamics between provider and partner, including using the terms *institutional racism* or *decolonisation*.

With the OECD [DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance \[OECD/LEGAL/5021\]](#), most DAC members are also committing to localise more of their support implemented in partnership with civil society.

Some members have emphasised the importance of more closely connecting development thinking to local realities. These reflections have been formalised to some extent within the following manifestos.

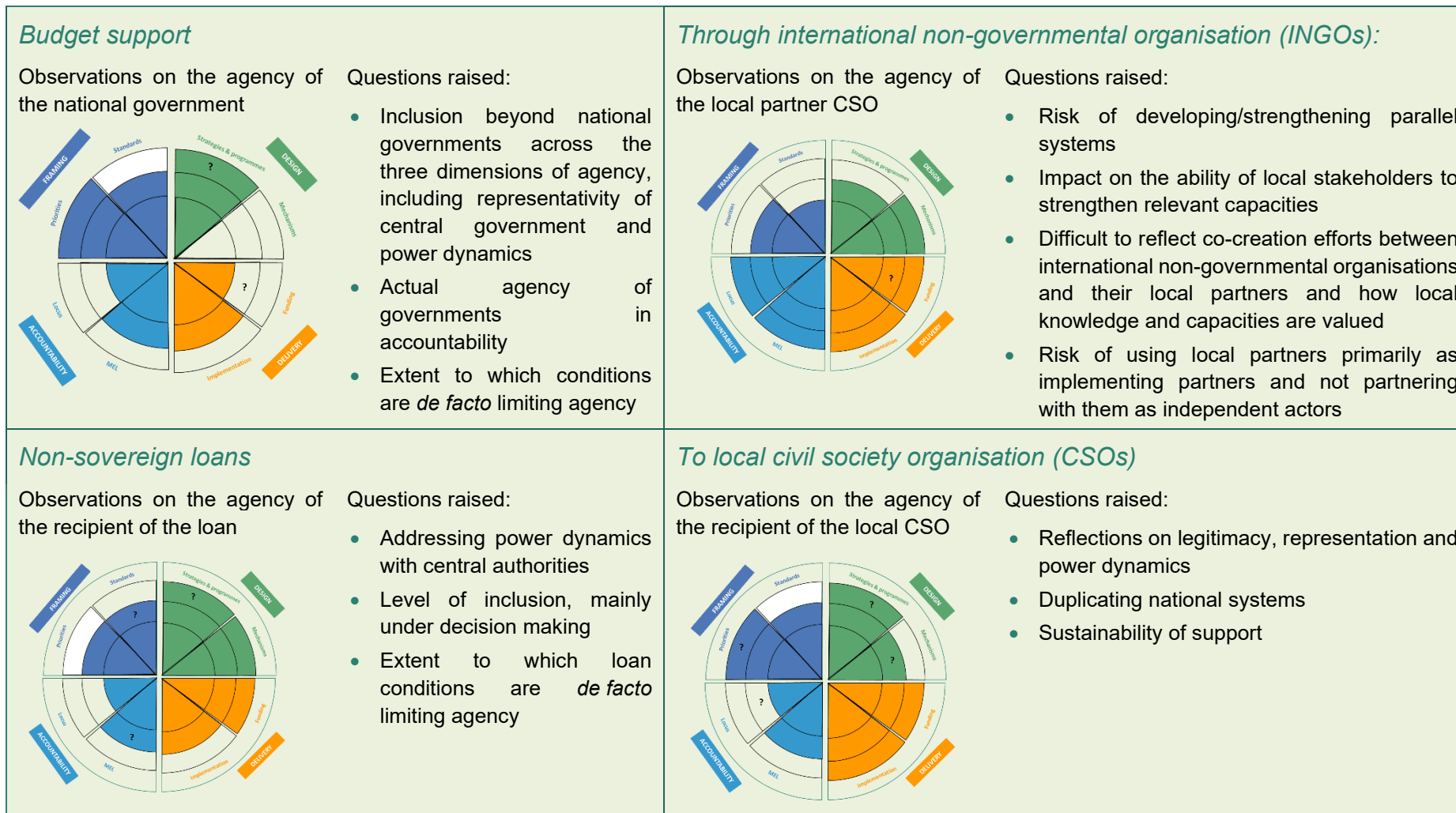
- Reflections on [thinking and working politically](#) and **doing development differently** aim to bring more attention to the political economy and the importance of inclusion, while being aware of risks of manipulation, co-option to support long-term changes, sustainability and scaling.
- The movement for [community-driven development](#) recognises the importance of community participation, local knowledge and social cohesion in achieving sustainable development outcomes.
- The [locally led adaptation principles](#) recognise the value of local knowledge and expertise to address climate risks and ensure that local actors on the front lines of climate change have equitable access to power and resources to build resilience.

Existing instruments and modalities provide scope for locally led development co-operation

Applying the conceptual framework to existing DAC co-operation modalities can help identify the breadth of opportunities within existing funding channels as well as their limits. [Figure 3](#) purposefully takes a broad sector and context lens to illustrate these opportunities and the questions the analytical framework can help raise. The illustrations only refer to a subset of co-operation modalities. The selection of modalities does not imply that others (such as working through the multilateral system, sovereign loans, technical assistance and contributions to pooled funds) cannot be associated with locally led development; they only serve as an illustration.

Each illustration also addresses only one group of local stakeholders but can be applied to the other groups across the three dimensions of agency in a complementary analysis. The bars illustrate the spectrum of agency for stylised co-operation modalities, with question marks where uncertainty around the level of agency is high. In this concept note, these are only possible interpretations; they are not a result of a systematic assessment. Given the importance of contextual parameters, the conceptual framework works at its best when applied to specific interventions.

Figure 3. Opportunities for more locally led approaches in a subset of stylised co-operation modalities



Some DAC members are also reflecting beyond business-as-usual

Looking at existing co-operation modalities through a locally led lens should not be understood as a way of maintaining the *status quo* and only supporting members to adjust at the margins. It can also help DAC members reflect on what they could consider as more substantive changes to the development co-operation business model. With the support of their partners, some DAC members are developing or funding more radical approaches. The learning exercise will bring out some good practices. Some examples include:

- The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) unsolicited proposals: organisations can submit unique, innovative or proprietary approaches to solve development challenges. USAID reviews unsolicited proposals and applications to determine whether funding such applications is in the best interest of the agency and consistent with USAID's development objectives.
- The START Network (supported by Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) is structured in a network of locally led, self-governing national and regional hubs with their own national and local members. It provides funding to its members to develop their own programmes.

5. Additional reflections to inform the peer learning exercise

Some issues run across DAC member systems and country contexts and would require more in-depth qualitative understanding, including testing assumptions. After consultation, it was decided to focus the qualitative understanding on the following issues:

- **Risk management and locally led development: Understanding which risks to take and which to avoid for sustainable impact.** The thematic deep dive organised in July 2023 discussed the need to recognise the full range of risks and opportunities for impact, flexibility to adapt risk management to context, empowering and training staff, the importance of tailoring and sharing due diligence assessments, and the avenues to engage with domestic stakeholders and mitigate reputational risks.
- **Strengthening and valuing local capacity and knowledge in a way which is more sustainable and reflects greater local agency.** This thematic deep dive will bring in Southern and partner country voices on how to value local capacity, establish a shared understanding of what capacities can be strengthened in the interest of local partners, and which approaches are useful for strengthening and valuing capacities and measuring progress.
- **Agency in accountability: How to place local agency and perspectives at the forefront of accountability efforts.** This thematic deep dive will be an opportunity to discuss efforts to move from downward accountability and address accountability and learning needs from the point of view of local stakeholders, and how to leverage the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC) monitoring and country dialogues to accelerate progress. This work will be conducted in collaboration with the GPEDC Secretariat and build on reflections from the Results Community and the DAC Evaluation Network.
- **Supporting locally led development in politically constrained environments: What does it mean in practice?** This thematic deep dive would be an opportunity to discuss how to navigate the specific challenges and risks associated with these contexts, such as limited civic space; weak transparency and accountability at the national level; a lack of trust between local communities, development practitioners and political authorities; the high risk of co-option control; risks of repression and persecution of CSOs and local leaders; and limited access to information. This

deep dive will be conducted in close co-ordination with the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) and GovNet and complement further research on development co-operation in politically constrained environments.

- **Measuring progress towards locally led development: What is the state of play?** This thematic deep dive will be an opportunity to discuss what measurement tools could be simplified and proxies shared across the DAC membership and beyond to measure progress towards locally led development. It will draw on data from the Creditor Reporting System, working closely with the Development Co-operation Directorate's statistical team, as well as gaining wider perspectives on measurement. Coming towards the end of the peer learning process, it will benefit from the member and country deep dives as well as the preceding deep dives.
- **What is required for multilateral actors to “go local”?** This thematic deep dive will reflect on the role of multilateral partners as bilateral actors decide to “go more local”; how bilateral partners might incentivise multilateral partners to prioritise locally led development; how bilateral and multilateral development partners can enable more locally led development co-operation and share practices; and how multilateral actors work with governments and societies in more challenging contexts. This work is conducted in partnership with the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN).

As part of the peer learning exercise, a series of in-depth and structured thematic peer learning forums will help unpack the challenges and approaches linked to some of these cross-cutting issues.

6. Questions

- How do you relate to the proposed broad definition of local stakeholders and of development co-operation that enables locally led development? What resonates? What does not?
- What do you see as opportunities and risks when using a broad understanding of locally led development?
- Does the current framing address the critical questions raised by locally led development?
- What is the impact of DAC members' current practices on current partnerships?

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