



Integrating Local Knowledge

Learning in Brief

This report examines local knowledge integration in the context of global development and humanitarian aid work. It builds upon a recently published report by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) called [Integrating Local Knowledge in Development Programming](#). That report sought to “share knowledge of how development donors and implementing organizations leverage local knowledge to inform programming.” This study aims to extend the original methods to better understand grassroots actors’ own interpretations of local knowledge and its integration into programming in their communities. It examines the perspectives of 29 grassroots leaders from women-led organizations around the world, looking deeply at the ways in which they conceptualize local knowledge and local knowledge stakeholders, their approaches to designing their own projects based on local knowledge, and their experiences sharing knowledge with international actors and donors. This builds the broader evidence base on integrating local knowledge to incorporate the perspectives of grassroots actors into the same conversation as the original study.

Key takeaways from this research span two broad categories – how local leaders conceptualize local knowledge and what the effective use of local knowledge in practice looks like to them. Within these categories, interviewees explored the many challenges they face in identifying and sharing knowledge; their various approaches to designing projects based on local knowledge; some of the tensions they often find themselves balancing; unique ways of measuring the contribution of such knowledge to the success of an intervention; and experiences with and strategies for sharing their knowledge with non-local actors.

In terms of how women leaders tend to conceptualize local knowledge, the research reveals three distinct but interconnected definitions of the term: 1) knowing what a community is like; 2) knowing what a community needs and where the solutions lie; and 3) having a profound connection with the community. The first definition indicates knowing a community well enough to understand the dynamics within it. The second goes a bit further to say that local knowledge means knowing both the specific needs present in a community as well

as the relevant solutions for addressing them. As one respondent told us, “Contextual expertise is having experience in a certain context and being able to solve problems based on it.” And the third conceptualization indicates having a deeply rooted connection with the community or the grassroots. Some described this as “having your heart” in the community. Key to this third definition appears to be both *consistency* and the ability to perceive *change* over time. Interviewees said that local knowledge depends on people having gone through different “contexts, histories, processes, and experiences” together, and having learned from them collectively. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, for international actors to acquire the same level of investment in communities that is quasi-synonymous with local knowledge unless they have lived, worked, and built relationships within them long enough to meet this consistency standard. Instead, this level of knowledge of a community and its context is fairly unique to local actors.

Understanding how local knowledge is defined is only the first step in conceptualizing it. Next comes

understanding the existing challenges that prevent it from being communicated and shared with non-local actors. Interviewees identified challenges such as lacking access to particular areas, being unable to openly discuss politically or culturally sensitive topics, and encountering tensions with Western/scientific knowledge. Perhaps most significantly, they noted that this local knowledge rarely gets shared effectively due to a lack of sufficient time, money, or resources. As one respondent said, “the issue is that there are many ways to produce knowledge, but for that knowledge to be known and valued needs a boost of resources and not all organizations have it. And if they are women’s organizations in the periphery, even less so.”

Regarding the use of local knowledge in practice, respondents told us of their many approaches to designing programs based on their knowledge. Critically, they told us: “we don’t *arrive* anywhere to work; we are already there.” They said that any actor should already have an established presence in a community before doing work within it. Furthermore, it is imperative to conduct consultation processes and context analyses before entering; identify and partner with local leaderships that already exist; and work strategically with non-local actors. To ensure that the voices of all local knowledge stakeholders are heard in any development context, interviewees say it is necessary, first, to consult with multiple local actors, and second, to do so in a way that makes them feel safe and comfortable enough to share. And when working with non-local actors, they expressed with frankness and honesty their many considerations that go into navigating certain tensions that often arise, including managing relationships with technical “experts” while making known their own expertise; deciding whether or not to abandon funding opportunities that do not align with local priorities; and navigating tensions between voices seen as “elite” and those that represent the community.

When these women leaders were prompted to explain how they know when local knowledge has indeed been shared effectively, they pointed to international actors. To them, a huge measure of success is when international actors learn and behave differently or connect with the grassroots in some deeper way. It can also be seen in instances when good solutions to problems are clearly based on local knowledge. And

often it is when the gap between Western knowledge and local knowledge is bridged in some way, or when networks are formed among NGOs that all then understand the needs of local stakeholders as a result.

Finally, the research explores women leaders’ experiences sharing their knowledge with international actors, digging into the attention they are paid, some of the good and bad practices for sharing that have been tested, and some of the specific donor practices they wish to see changed. While several interviewees expressed that they have noticed a gradual improvement in international actors’ engagement with them over time, many still cautioned that they are not always listened to, or that they are listened to but nothing comes of it afterward. In the words of one leader, “when they want us to develop something for them, they listen to us very carefully. But in critical moments, we do not get listened to very carefully.” This also relates to local organizations’ desire to see partnerships that are long-term and meaningful, that do not only emerge at certain moments in a project cycle. Then, in terms of donor relations, they consistently expressed the desire for more flexibility. They pointed out some contradictory dynamics among the funding scenario; for instance, while leaders in some regions expressed that donors are not willing enough to change what they have funded in the past – such as sewing and hairdressing workshops for women – in other regions they noted that donors are too preoccupied with creativity and newness, and create unrealistic expectations for local organizations to constantly reinvent the wheel rather than implement what is known to work well. The ultimate solution in each of these cases, then, would be a greater amount of flexibility and more power in the hands of locally led organizations to make decisions based on their knowledge of their communities. In the end, the vast majority of the remarks we heard in this research point to the dire need to place local knowledge at the center of humanitarian work, with the most direct takeaway nicely summarized by one leader:

“Outside actors must realize that they are not going into a community to teach, but that knowledge already exists there”.



Methods

The methodology used for this research was adapted from the one used in USAID's *Integrating Local Knowledge in Development Programming*. The CARE research team borrowed the research questions used by the USAID team with development organizations and modified it to be more apt for use with grassroots women leaders across the globe. The CARE research team together with one external consultant then reached out to its partners across a variety of regional contexts to gauge interest in interview participation, and in the end conducted 29 interviews with women leaders across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Their inputs and recommendations are synthesized throughout this report. Many of their comments have been translated by the research team into English. Because of the nature of work done by this team at CARE, which is focused on gender-based violence in emergencies, many of its partners work in the areas of prevention, mitigation, and response to gender-based violence (GBV), and thus their answers are grounded within that setting. This document does not rely heavily on literature review or outside research, but rather specifically intends to convey the inputs of these 29 women leaders.

The below map shows the locations of each of the organizations represented in this report, though all locations are approximate. Some of the interviewees no longer live in the same place as their organizations – particularly those who have had to flee – but they still represent the organizations based there. We spoke with leaders from 7 organizations in Africa, 4 in Asia, 6 in Latin America, and 11 in MENA. For a full list of countries represented, please see **Annex A**.





Recommendations to Donors and Development Agencies

Identify local leaderships and networks before entering a community. Build relationships and involve local organizations from the very beginning of a project, and always conduct consultation processes with women and women leaders in the project area.

Enter a community together with a member of the community, and do so humbly and without assumptions. Give key leaders in the community co-ownership over any intervention.

Work with truly local organizations. Local does not mean the same as national; there is a lot of local knowledge that sits only within specific communities, and national-level organizations do not have that knowledge for every community in a given country. Funding given to national-level organizations does not necessarily trickle down to the local level.

Maintain partnerships even when there is not a project or proposal at hand and create spaces for critique. Provide spaces for genuine back-and-forth discussion with partners, where they can be honest and provide suggestions and feedback for non-local actors without fear of punishment in the next round of partner selection. Create spaces where both partners can learn from one another.

Stop bringing in outsiders where they aren't needed. Local actors already have expertise. Instead of bringing in technical “experts,” train local organizations on technical knowledge so that they can do the work themselves.

Be flexible. Allow grassroots partners to decide what the need is in their communities and to design their own projects, goals, and M&E plans. Also, allow them to make changes to a project when needs and contexts shift, as they so often do in humanitarian settings.

Understand the specific language and terminology used in a community. Work hard to adapt to using preferred terms, and do not use development agency speak that muddles communication and confuses understanding between partners.

Include grassroots actors at various types of events and discussions. While many local organizations feel that they have been listened to well at international conferences, smaller workshops are sometimes preferred, as they facilitate deeper conversations and better include the voices of local organizations.

Provide funding and visa support for local actors' participation in international conferences and events. Grassroots actors should not simply be invited to international spaces, but brought there and funded by the inviting organization.

Provide feedback whenever possible. Especially when rejecting proposals for funding or other contributions from local organizations, give them feedback on why they have been rejected and help build the skills and administrative capacities of small organizations when they are lacking.

Be aware of local power dynamics within communities. Do not assume that to speak with one sector of a local community is to gain the knowledge held by all various members within it, as some voices are louder than others due to inherent power dynamics.

Avoid extractive practices. When collecting information from local actors, be transparent with how you plan to use it. Build trust with local organizations so they do not feel they are being used by international actors. Instead of only requesting information from them, partner with them.

Stop practicing “donor propaganda.” Do not be the donor that only wants to attend events, have your photos taken, and put your logo on the materials, without actual regard for the issue at hand or the communities affected.

Right-size the bureaucratic requirements, restrictions, and conditions placed upon grantees. The combination of these requirements and the lack of support that comes with them is seen by local actors as an extractive practice.

Use a fair approach to calculating overhead costs for local organizations, including salaries. The current pay discrepancies within the humanitarian system lead to inequalities between frontline workers and expatriates who are paid more to work in a given context from their national headquarters.

Invest in networks of solidarity. Particularly important in emergency situations, as competition for funds often increases in these scenarios, donors should play a role in maintaining cohesion and cooperation among all partners by creating networks among partners in the communities they fund in.



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