Defining Success in Locally Led Development

Perspectives from Members' Partners

dóchas

The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations

Defining Success in Locally Led Development: Perspectives from Members' Partners

Perspectives from local civil society organisations and community-based organisations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda

Research conducted by the Vashi Impact Group (VIG) on behalf of Dóchas

This document references Dóchas member organisations as key interlocutors with local partners. Its findings and recommendations are, however, relevant to the wider international non-governmental organisation (INGO) community. Similarly, while Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is referenced as a donor, the document is relevant to other donors and stakeholders in the sector.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Meaning
CBO	Community-based organisation
CSF	Civil Society Fund
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFAT Ireland	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Ireland
DFAT Australia	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Australia
FGD	Focus group discussion
ICSP	Ireland's Civil Society Partnership for A Better World
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key informant interview
LLD	Locally led development
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee
VIG	Vashi Impact Group

Executive Summary

Background and purpose

Dóchas commissioned a qualitative study to explore how the local partners of our member organisations define, experience, and measure success in locally led development (LLD). The study was conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda and engaged 28 local civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), cooperatives, and women-led organisations partnering with 8 Dóchas member organisations.

The primary aim was to generate evidence on what local partners themselves consider to be meaningful indicators of progress towards LLD, and to use those perspectives to inform discussion on more inclusive and contextually grounded monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) frameworks across the Dóchas membership. This study forms part of Dóchas members' broader commitment to advancing equitable partnerships and supporting the transition towards locally led development cooperation.

Dóchas commissioned the Vashi Impact Group (VIG) to undertake this research. The findings presented in this report reflect the perspectives and beliefs of participating local partners. They are not intended as a definitive or statistically representative assessment of progress across all Dóchas member partnerships.

The main purpose of the study is to enable and support members and other stakeholders to further strengthen efforts in moving to locally led models of development.

A note on perspective

Throughout this report, findings reflect the perceptions and lived experiences of local partners. These perspectives are presented as important evidence in their own right – whether or not they fully align with the experience of member organisations or other sector stakeholders. Understanding how partners see the partnership, and more general approaches to development, is in itself a critical step towards more equitable collaboration.

Key findings

Measurement of progress towards LLD

Dóchas member organisations demonstrate strong and growing commitment to LLD, increasingly framing it as a broader shift in power, decision-making, ownership, and accountability rather than simply a programming modality. Measurement approaches are strengthening, with a number of member organisations tracking various elements and levels of participation, partnership quality, organisational strengthening, accountability, and community engagement. How much, and what, is measured in relation to the move to more locally led models of development varies significantly across participating members. Measurement systems remain stronger in capturing programme performance and partnership processes than in assessing deeper transformational shifts related to power redistribution, local autonomy, and decision-making authority.

From the perspective of local partners, measurement practices overall remain heavily shaped by donor and member organisation reporting requirements. Local partners are primarily positioned as generators of programme-level evidence within externally defined MEAL systems, rather than as independent designers of measurement frameworks based on local context and systems.

Power dynamics and governance

Power imbalances remain a defining feature of the development system as perceived by local partners. Authority over strategic direction, programme design, and funding allocation is largely concentrated among donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Local partners consistently distinguish between consultation and participation, and genuine leadership – they are often engaged after key decisions have already been made. Gradual shifts are evident in some long-term partnerships and consortium models, but these remain uneven and context specific and differ across locations and partner types.

Financing and resource mobilisation

While partners highlight areas where some progress has been made, financing structures are largely perceived as a central constraint on LLD. Local partners reference indirect funding flows, short-term project funding, delayed disbursements, rigid donor conditions, unrealistic and limiting co-funding requirements, and limited flexibility in budget utilisation and repurposing in the case of changing contexts. Financial, operational, and other risks are seen as disproportionately carried by local organisations, particularly smaller and grassroots partners.

Strategy, co-creation, and programme design

Local partners consistently emphasise the importance of being involved from the earliest stages of strategic direction, priority setting, and programme conceptualisation. While improvements in consultation and co-creation are acknowledged, priorities, strategies, and funding frameworks are still frequently developed externally by donors and INGOs before local partners are engaged. Positive examples highlighted during discussions, where co-creation has been meaningfully practised, demonstrate its effectiveness in improving relevance, acceptance, and sustainability.

Capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening is recognised as central to LLD, but participating local partners report that existing approaches often remain training-oriented and externally defined. Meaningful capacity strengthening, from local partner perspectives, involves the promotion and enabling of increased autonomy, stronger governance systems, negotiation power, resource mobilisation capacity, and organisational resilience – not training delivery alone.

MEAL systems

MEAL systems are largely oriented towards upward accountability to donors through reporting, compliance, and predefined indicators. Local partners measure programme delivery, outputs, participation, and financial accountability within frameworks designed by donors and INGOs while dimensions more closely associated with progress on LLD – such as local agency, ownership, trust, and mutual accountability – remain weakly captured.

Recommendations summary

The findings of this research are intended for donors and INGOs, specifically the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT Ireland) and the membership of Dóchas. While full recommendations are presented in Chapter 5, we briefly call on these stakeholders to:

- **Develop an integrated approach** to evaluating the shift to LLD, focusing on behavioural change by tracking a range of metrics along a progressive continuum.
- **Prioritise the long-term transfer** of control over resources and decision-making, rather than limiting focus to funding flows alone.
- **Adopt an initial menu of metrics** as a shared reference point to encourage an incremental move toward LLD. A sample menu is provided in **Table 3, Chapter 4**, and a framework outlining levels of change is included in **Annex 1**.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 About Dóchas and this study

Dóchas is the Irish network for international development and humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), working collectively towards a just, sustainable, and equal world. The network comprises 47 full members and 10 associate members engaged across a broad range of sectors including human rights, poverty eradication, humanitarian response, protection, sustainability, education, disability inclusion, climate action, and social justice. Through convening, advocacy, coordination, and knowledge sharing, Dóchas strengthens collective learning and collaboration across the Irish international development sector.

In recent years, Dóchas has increasingly positioned locally led development (LLD) at the centre of our strategic and policy engagement. This reflects wider global shifts within the development and humanitarian sector towards recognising the leadership, agency, and decision-making authority of partners in the Global South, particularly those closest to affected communities. Across the Dóchas membership, organisations are progressively exploring how to move beyond traditional partnership models towards more equitable relationships that strengthen local ownership, leadership, accountability, and autonomy.

A key driver of this momentum has been **Ireland's Civil Society Partnership for A Better World (ICSP) framework.** Under the ICSP, Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT Ireland) requires funded organisations to demonstrate concrete progress towards locally led approaches, particularly through Process Outcome 3, which focuses on empowering local partners to represent and deliver services to communities and people. All ten ICSP partner organisations within the Dóchas membership have developed LLD policies or pathways to guide this transition. Other Dóchas member organisations, including both **strategic and Civil Society Fund (CSF) partners**, are also increasingly engaging with LLD agendas through internal reforms, partnership reviews, and efforts to strengthen accountability and local ownership.

Across both ICSP and other member organisations, there is growing recognition that while important advancements have been made in policy development and partnership approaches, frameworks for measuring the progress towards LLD remain underdeveloped. Existing approaches often focus on partnership quality or funding flows and may be ad hoc in nature, with limited clarity around how dimensions such as local agency, leadership, ownership, and accountability should be promoted and assessed in practice.

1.2 Purpose and objectives of this study

Dóchas commissioned the Vashi Impact Group (VIG) to conduct a qualitative study with the following objectives:

- To support Dóchas members in meeting their commitments to LLD by gathering evidence on what local partners consider to be relevant indicators of success in moving to LLD models.
- To promote the wider shift towards LLD through the measurement of success factors as defined by local partners.
- To begin to understand the more transformative elements, from local partner perspectives, that indicate a shift in power, and what that looks like in terms of monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL).
- To make recommendations to donors on LLD success factors as perceived by local partners in the Global South.

The study was exploratory in nature and aimed at generating grounded insights and learning rather than statistically representative findings. The findings presented reflect the perspectives and beliefs of participating local partners, whether or not those perspectives are always corroborated by member organisations or by objective measurement. Understanding how our members' partners experience and perceive the partnership is itself a critical element of advancing the shift towards LLD.

1.3 Scope of the study

The study was conducted across three countries in East Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. These countries were selected to reflect diverse contexts of LLD, partnership arrangements, and operational realities, and because they host a significant number of Dóchas member organisations and their local partners.

The study engaged local civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), cooperatives, and women-led structures that partner with Dóchas members. Due to scope and resource constraints, the research did not include private sector entities, local authorities, or government institutions, although these partner types also play important roles within broader locally led ecosystems.

The study explored the following thematic areas:

- Partnership development and power dynamics
- Financing and resource control
- Capacity strengthening and institutional development
- Participation, inclusion, and decision-making processes
- MEAL and measurement of the shift towards LLD
- Barriers, enablers, and pathways to transformative change

1.4 Research questions

The study was guided by seven research questions:

- What do local CSOs and CBOs identify as the key indicators of success in advancing LLD within their contexts?
- How do local partners perceive their roles and levels of agency, ownership, leadership, and accountability in existing development partnerships?
- What transformative changes in power dynamics and decision-making processes do local partners associate with meaningful progress towards LLD?
- How are factors such as financial sustainability, autonomy, and representation prioritised and experienced by local partners in the pursuit of LLD?
- What challenges and enablers do local partners identify in measuring and demonstrating progress towards LLD within MEAL frameworks?
- How can MEAL frameworks be adapted or developed to better capture and support locally defined success factors and priorities in the move towards LLD?
- What recommendations do local partners have for INGOs and donors to strengthen support for LLD?

A full outline of methodology is provided in **Annex 2**.

Chapter 2: How LLD Is Currently Measured – Dóchas Member and Partner Perspectives

2.1 What our member organisations are measuring

Across both the interviews conducted with participating member organisations and the documentation reviewed, we found strong and growing commitment to the shift towards LLD across the Dóchas membership. There is evidence that participating member organisations increasingly frame LLD not simply as a programming modality, but as a broader shift in relationships, decision-making, accountability, and power within the development and humanitarian sector.

Organisational documents emphasised respectful partnerships, community leadership, participation, mutual accountability, and the strengthening of local systems. LLD is commonly associated, among these members, with decentralised decision-making, community ownership, and the repositioning of INGOs as facilitators and convenors rather than primary drivers of development processes.

> ***'It's not that we are sitting somewhere designing programmes and then asking partners to implement them. The ideas and priorities should come from the local organisations themselves.'***
>
> Key informant,
> Dóchas member organisation

However, member organisations are at very different stages in the move towards LLD. Some demonstrate relatively advanced efforts to formalise LLD commitments through dedicated strategies, partnership frameworks, governance arrangements, and accountability mechanisms. Others articulate LLD more broadly through organisational values and partnership principles. This variation reflects the evolving nature of LLD across the sector and the absence of standardised approaches for conceptualising and operationalising LLD commitments. It also reflects the different histories and programming modalities of member organisations.

It is important to note that how much, and what, is measured in relation to the move to more locally led models of development varies significantly across participating members. While a small number have set LLD-related benchmarks against which they report to donors, there is no consistent approach to measuring the shift to LLD. The research also reflects more of **what** a small number of organisations are trying to track rather than **how** they are tracking (the indicators).

Current measurement systems appear strongest in tracking a small selection of operational and relational dimensions of LLD: participation, partnership functioning, organisational capacity strengthening, funding arrangements, and community engagement. However, the research suggests they remain less developed in capturing deeper transformational shifts in power, local autonomy, and decision-making authority.

Table 1 summarises some of the domains and types of indicators currently used by some member organisations, drawn from the key informant interviews (KIIs) and desk review of a sample of organisational policies, LLD strategies, and partnership frameworks.

While the table shows there are some SMART indicators which participating members employ, there are a number of important domains where examples of indicators are few, such as risk sharing, governance and autonomy, and local partner visibility. This in itself suggests the need to invest in developing a range of appropriate measures from which the membership can draw, depending on context and type of partner.

Some evidence is qualitative, often gathered through surveys and meetings between member organisations and local partners, while some is quantitative, based on financial and other information.

In summary, while Table 1 represents what some members are tracking, or aspiring to measure, it is not intended as a best practice recommendation but rather reflects some of the challenges and opportunities for the sector in developing MEAL for LLD.

Table 1: What is currently measured by some Dóchas member organisations

Domain	What is being measured	Example indicators
Decision-making power and influence	• Extent of local partner participation and influence in decision-making and coordination spaces • Extent to which programme priorities and implementation are locally defined and led • Evidence of local partners leading programme prioritisation and design processes; extent to which programme priorities are locally defined • Evidence of partners' increased leadership and/or influence in coordination or decision-making spaces • Extent of local governance resources and level of national leadership representation • Evidence of participation and representation of marginalised groups within leadership and programme structures	• Percentage of projects involving local partners in decision-making • Percentage of proposals co-created with partners and project stakeholders • Number of CSOs that engage effectively with relevant stakeholders • Percentage of national staff in leadership positions • Presence of local governance documentation and structures • Representation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, and marginalised groups in governance and decision-making structures
Equitable partnerships	• Quality of partnerships, shared decision-making, trust, and partner influence across programme cycles • Partners' perception of their ability to influence decisions relevant to them throughout the programme/ project cycle	• Tracked partnership assessment scores completed by local partners • Percentage of partners positively reporting their relationship

Domain	What is being measured	Example indicators
Financing and resource allocation	• Proportion of funding managed by local partners • Evidence of equitable resource sharing • Evidence of flexible financing arrangements	• Evidence of organisational policies on sharing indirect costs with partners • Presence of commitments to multi-year and flexible funding arrangements between INGO and partner in policies and procedures • Percentage of programme budget on-granted to local partners
Capacity strengthening and organisation development	• Level of organisational resilience, institutional strengthening, and leadership development of local partners including evidence of monetary investments in institutional capacity strengthening, e.g. annual capacity strengthening budgets	• Number of action plans in place (capacity, sustainability etc.) • Percentage of partners with capacity development plans • Percentage of partners supported (through financial means, human resources, etc.) to become more sustainable beyond the project cycle
Sustainability and systems strengthening	• Embedding of programmes within local systems and strengthening of long-term continuity of local structures	• Presence of project activities owned and delivered by local duty bearers • Continuation of services beyond project support • Number of local structures strengthened
Transparency and accountability	• Joint learning outcomes • Functioning accountability mechanisms • Evidence of collaborative review processes	• Presence of joint planning and review mechanisms in partnership agreements • Presence of local partners and stakeholders in learning events
Community ownership and accountability	• Level of community engagement, feedback, participation in programme cycles • Level of accountability to affected populations • Level of community participation in programme design and monitoring	• Existence of community feedback mechanisms • Presence of participatory tools in MEAL systems

2.2 Local partners – tracking LLD and their role in MEAL

When asked during focus group discussions (FGDs) and workshops whether they measure and evaluate changes relating to LLD, local partners said they did not. They spoke more broadly about their roles in MEAL processes and how they are not generally positioned as independent designers of measurement systems, but rather as key generators of programme-level evidence within externally defined frameworks. The perception is that what they measure is shaped less by their own institutional priorities and more by the operational, compliance, and reporting requirements of INGOs and donors.

The in-country workshops provided an important opportunity to deepen reflection on the measurement of the shift towards LLD. Through facilitated discussions and engagement with examples of LLD indicators used elsewhere, participants were able to explore the relational, institutional, and transformational dimensions of LLD more explicitly, including issues of power, decision-making, ownership, trust, participation, and accountability.

In practice, current measurement by local partners largely focuses on the following:

Delivery and outputs

Local partners predominantly measure what they implement. Indicators focus on activities delivered, outputs achieved, reach and coverage of interventions, and immediate changes at the community level. While recognising that tracking outputs at this level is necessary, this reflects a model where measurement is closely tied to accountability for delivery, reinforcing the positioning of local partners as implementers rather than decision-makers.

Capacity strengthening – referenced but weakly measured

Feedback suggested that while capacity strengthening and organisational development for local partners is happening, its measurement remains ad hoc, externally defined, and focused on activities such as training delivered rather than outcomes or impact. There is limited systematic tracking of institutional growth, financial and operational autonomy, or organisational resilience over time.

Community participation and inclusion – not decision-making or influence

Local partners can generate robust data on community participation and how programmes are reaching different groups – tracking participation, engagement of women, youth, and marginalised groups, and the functionality of community-level structures. However, while community participation is systematically measured, influence is not. Local partners capture who is involved, but not who holds decision-making power or control over resources. Inclusion is operationalised primarily as participation rather than leadership or authority.

Feedback systems – process over accountability

Local partners play an active role in collecting community feedback, complaints and response data, and perceptions of service relevance. However, these feedback systems primarily support programme improvement and upward reporting rather than assessing whether accountability relationships are equitable or reciprocal. Accountability is treated as a process – feedback collected and documented – rather than as an outcome relating to strengthened relationships or improved responsiveness.

Chapter 3: Key Thematics – Local Partner Perspectives

This chapter presents the key themes emerging from primary evidence gathered from local partner organisations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, as well as from the KIIs with Dóchas members and desk review of member organisation documentation. The findings are organised thematically across the core dimensions shaping progress towards LLD. Throughout, findings are presented as the perspectives of local partners, reflecting how they experience and understand their partnerships with Dóchas member organisations.

3.1 Power dynamics, decision-making, and governance

Some progress while significant power imbalances persist

Power imbalances remain a defining feature of the development system, as perceived by local partners across all three countries. Authority over priority setting, strategic direction, programme design, funding allocation, and procurement is largely seen as concentrated among donors and INGOs. While local partners are increasingly involved in implementation and, in some cases, steering committees and consortium arrangements, their influence over priority setting, governance, and resource allocation is perceived as limited.

Local partners repeatedly distinguish between participation and genuine leadership. As partners in Kenya described, they are frequently engaged after key project decisions have already been made, limiting their ability to influence priorities and outcomes. In Ethiopia, organisations emphasised that genuine LLD requires communities and local institutions to hold real authority over priorities and programme design.

'They join at a stage when the strategy is set, and the priorities have already been defined.'

FGD participant

One telling example from Ethiopia describes a project where external technical expertise was prioritised over local knowledge, with farmers excluded from the design process and foreign engineers engaged instead. When flooding occurred, the project failed – a direct consequence of that exclusion.

'Farmers were ignored… engineers were foreign… the floods came and the project failed.'

Workshop participant, Ethiopia

At the same time, there is evidence of gradual shifts within some partnerships – particularly long-term partnerships and consortium models – where local partners report increased participation in governance structures, stronger negotiating positions, and greater recognition of local knowledge and leadership. These shifts are, however, variable and context specific rather than systemic.

Differences by organisational type are also significant. Cooperative unions frame LLD in terms of self-reliance, collective ownership, financial autonomy, and long-term community embeddedness. Community-based organisations and grassroots groups focus on the need for more meaningful participation, inclusion, solidarity, and community mobilisation. More formal local NGOs frequently raise concerns about donor control, intermediary power, and unequal decision-making authority. On the positive side, one long-established formal NGO spoke of a positive transition towards lead partner in a consortium that included national and INGOs. On the negative, another established entity spoke about the expectation that national NGOs should have board members from the Global North in order to be seen as more credible and credit-worthy.

Inclusion of women and marginalised groups

Local partners acknowledge that their Dóchas member organisation partners have increasingly prioritised gender equality, disability inclusion, youth participation, and community engagement within partnership and programme approaches. Partners in Uganda reported increased leadership opportunities for women with disabilities; in Kenya, women's groups have been supported to engage local authorities and advocate collectively.

However, local partners consistently note that inclusion remains stronger at the implementation and community level than within higher-level decision-making spaces linked to programme design, governance, financial planning, and priority-setting.

> ***'We are asked what we need, but we are not always part of deciding what is done.'***
> FGD participant

Local partners emphasise that meaningful inclusion as it relates to LLD requires moving beyond participation towards greater influence over decision-making, resource allocation, programme priorities, and leadership within partnerships themselves.

Transparency and accountability

Local partners raise concerns about limited transparency in funding arrangements and decision-making within partnerships. Most participants report having only partial visibility over project budgets, overhead allocations, and funding flows, reinforcing perceptions that local organisations are primarily implementers rather than equal partners in resource decisions. One local partner, however, welcomed that they were given full visibility of overall budgets by a Dóchas member.

In general, accountability systems are perceived as heavily oriented towards donor reporting and compliance, often at the expense of learning and programme adaptation.

> ***'We spend more time reporting than reflecting on what the data is telling us.'***
> FGD participant

In contrast, accountability between local partners and communities is often described as more direct and relational – particularly in Kenya, where regular community meetings, feedback forums, and ongoing dialogue allow communities to raise concerns and influence programme implementation.

> ***'At community level, accountability is immediate – people will tell you if something is not working.'***
> FGD participant, Kenya

Local partners emphasise the need for more balanced and mutual accountability systems. As one participant stated plainly: 'Accountability should go both ways – not just (from local partners) to donors, but also (from donors and partners) to communities.'

3.2 Financing and resource mobilisation

Structural constraints in financing

Financing and resource mobilisation are perceived as central determinants of progress towards LLD across all three countries. Local partners consistently highlight that current financing models are characterised by indirect flows, limited flexibility, and constrained local control. Resources are largely mediated through international actors, positioning local organisations primarily as implementers rather than strategic actors with authority over financial decision-making.

> ***'Much of the financing should go more directly towards local partners, instead of going to intermediaries.'***
> FGD participant, Ethiopia

The challenge is not only the quantity of funding available, but also the extent to which local partners are able to influence how resources are prioritised, allocated, and managed. In several cases, local organisations report not only limited visibility over total project budgets but restricted authority over procurement and resource allocation decisions.

At the same time, evidence from Uganda suggests that when financing is linked to capacity strengthening, it can support longer-term sustainability. It illustrates that financing models combining resource provision with organisation development can enable more durable and locally led outcomes.

Positive examples from Kenya demonstrate how financing local partners with contextual knowledge can translate into effective and measurable improvements in well-being. When community-level organisations received support aligned with the priorities they had set out, the results were tangible and sustained. The examples given included improved cookstoves, water access, and livelihoods programming.

> ***'They gave us knowledge; we went and implemented… the smokeless stoves… and respiratory illnesses ended.'***
> FGD participant, Kenya

Predictability and timeliness of funding

Short-term and unpredictable funding is a key constraint to LLD. Most local partners receive project-based funding with limited continuity beyond defined cycles. This restricts long-term planning, institutional growth, retention of skilled staff, and organisational stability.

> ***'By the time the next project starts, you have to rebuild the team and the trust with communities.'***
> FGD participant, Uganda

In Kenya, short funding cycles limit the ability of organisations to follow through on community commitments or sustain gains achieved during implementation. In Ethiopia, funding unpredictability is linked to disbursement delays that affect staff retention and service delivery.

> ***'When funding stops, everything stops – we don't have reserves to continue.'***
> FGD participant, Ethiopia

More broadly, funding uncertainty forces organisations to shift continuously between programme implementation and short-term survival, limiting investment in long-term systems and institutional development.

> ***'We are always spending our time planning for the next project instead of building something that lasts.'***
> Workshop participant, Kenya

Flexibility of funding

Despite some progress shared, funding is widely described by local partners as restricted and inflexible, with strict budget lines, limited scope for reallocation, and complex approval processes for adjustments. This limits the ability of local organisations to respond to emerging needs, align activities with seasonal or community dynamics, or adapt programmes in fragile or rapidly changing environments.

> ***'Even when the situation changes, the budget does not change.'***
>
> FGD participant, Kenya

Positive examples of flexible financing, and practical ways of ensuring flexibility, demonstrate its potential. In one case during the COVID-19 period, a partner in Ethiopia was able to engage the donor and redirect part of a schoolgirl-focused project budget towards emergency food assistance for women and their families who had lost income. This adaptive response was only possible because a flexibility clause had been built into the project agreement from the outset.

> ***'We were able to pivot… and provide food supplies instead of continuing the original activities.'***
>
> Workshop participant, Ethiopia

This example reinforces an important principle: flexibility and a mechanism to discuss and negotiate when necessary must be built into partnership agreements proactively. A partner outlined how this can help avoid time lost in trying to access the donor and look for a solution in response to each crisis.

Funding requirements and access barriers

Funding requirements are perceived as presenting significant barriers to local partner participation and, at times, effective programme delivery. These include co-funding requirements that exclude smaller or resource-constrained organisations.

> ***'We are expected to mobilise 50% but only get 10% in advance… the risk is all ours.'***
>
> FGD participant

Complex application processes with digital requirements are also seen as a significant barrier, in particular to smaller grassroots organisations who do not have easy access to stable digital platforms.

> ***'We tried to complete a funding application online that includes a five-minute window for submitting a code – when the system went down because of a connection problem we couldn't complete it.'***
>
> Workshop participant

Similarly, partners spoke of stringent compliance and reporting systems that impose disproportionate administrative burdens, and eligibility criteria that favour larger INGOs.

Risk sharing

Financial and operational risks are perceived as disproportionately carried by local organisations. While partnerships are framed as collaborative, in practice risk allocation is frequently asymmetrical: donors and intermediaries retain control over resources while local partners absorb implementation and financial uncertainties. Table 2 illustrates perceptions of differing levels of control and how these relate to the level of risk carried by donors, INGOs, local partners, and communities respectively.

Table 2: Summary of control vs risk by actor

Actor	Control over resources	Level of risk
Donors	High	Low
INGOs (including Dóchas members)	Moderate–High	Moderate
Local partners	Low	High
Communities	Very Low	Very High

One area of financial risk is highlighted above in the case of the partner expected to mobilise a high percentage of finance while receiving just 10% in advance. This example, raised during a workshop, was discussed alongside other examples of established NGOs being required to meet certain milestones, regardless of circumstance, in order to draw down a tranche of funds. In one case, where activities were delayed and milestones not met due to external factors (in this instance political), the partner carried the risk, which they believed to be a disproportionate burden.

> ***'We carry the risk on the ground, but we do not control the resources.'***
> Workshop participant, Ethiopia

A positive example, however, was cited by a local partner in Ethiopia, who had negotiated a clause in its agreement providing for joint discussion in the event of currency fluctuations applicable to both losses and gains. When exchange rate movements produced additional funds, the organisation was able to reinvest them in expanding programme activities and improving staff salaries. This example demonstrates what more equitable risk-sharing arrangements can look like in practice.

Funding diversification and domestic resource mobilisation

Local partners highlight their need to look for alternative sources of financing for long-term sustainability, and to reduce dependence on traditional aid and donors. Particularly in Kenya and Ethiopia, they raised the aspiration to explore other forms of income and the growing importance of domestic resource mobilisation. In workshops, discussions touched on local philanthropy, community contribution models, income-generating initiatives and social enterprise. Reference to private sector engagement included corporate social responsibility mechanisms, in particular in Ethiopia, as pathways to reduce dependence on external funding. They emphasised the role of small and medium-sized business as being embedded at the community level, and the expectation that they would contribute to supporting communities in times of crisis.

3.3 Strategy, co-creation, and programme design

Across all three countries, local partners consistently emphasise that they are best positioned to identify community needs and set development priorities due to their proximity to, and embeddedness within, communities. Effective programming should begin with local realities.

> ***'We know where we have the gap… rather than coming with a written agenda… when we are together from the start, we will have a voice.'***
> Workshop participant, Ethiopia

In Uganda, this connection between local knowledge and sustainability was particularly clear. Programmes grounded in locally identified priorities are more likely to be sustained beyond project cycles, because communities view them as directly relevant to their needs.

> ***'When the idea comes from the community, they take responsibility for it.'***
> FGD participant, Uganda

Despite this strong consensus around the value of local knowledge, strategic priorities are still frequently shaped or constrained by donor frameworks, funding conditions, and predefined thematic areas. Local partners are often consulted during needs identification, but not during final decision-making or prioritisation.

> ***'We are asked what the problems are but not always involved in deciding which ones are prioritised.'***
> FGD participant

There are clear and encouraging examples of co-creation and participatory programme design among participating partners, particularly in Kenya, where some describe structured engagement mechanisms that support ongoing dialogue and joint feedback. In Ethiopia, partners note that where co-creation has been genuinely practised, local partners are better able to ensure community alignment.

However, significant structural gaps persist. Local partners believe they remain more actively engaged in implementation and adaptation than in early-stage strategy and design, limiting their influence over core priorities. Without explicit mechanisms for early-stage co-creation, participation risks remaining partial and even piecemeal rather than transformative.

3.4 Capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening is consistently recognised across both the desk review and primary evidence as central to advancing LLD. There is broad agreement that sustainable local leadership depends not only on technical skills, but on strong institutional systems, governance structures, and organisational resilience.

The desk review reflects the start of a shift in discourse away from transactional, short-term training towards systems-oriented capacity strengthening. Some member organisations emphasise long-term institutional resilience, while some link capacity strengthening to inclusive leadership and locally rooted governance systems.

However, primary evidence from local partners indicates that in practice, they see a lot of capacity strengthening as remaining largely externally driven and aligned with donor and INGO compliance requirements. Many initiatives focus on reporting, financial accountability, and project delivery systems rather than locally identified priorities or long-term institutional needs.

> ***'Capacity building should not just be about reporting… it should help us run our organisations better.'***
> FGD participant

Local partners associate effective capacity strengthening with:

- increased ability to independently manage resources
- influence over programme decisions
- ability to mobilise funding
- engagement in strategic planning
- strengthened governance systems
- sustainability beyond external funding cycles.

There are important differences in requirements by organisation type. More formal NGOs generally demonstrate stronger institutional systems in financial management, compliance, and MEAL. CBOs often have strong contextual knowledge, social legitimacy, and community relationships, but face constraints in administrative systems and technical expertise. These differences call for differentiated and context-sensitive approaches rather than uniform models.

Critical capacity gaps identified by local partners across all contexts include:

- governance and leadership systems
- MEAL systems
- financial management
- digital infrastructure
- technical and sector-specific expertise.

As mentioned above and expressed by one participant in Kenya, organisation development and improved governance should be truly local in nature, and not conflated with patterns reflecting systems or resources from donor countries – as in the case of adding board members from the Global North in order to attract increased funding.

3.5 Compliance, tools, and templates

Tools, templates, compliance requirements, and due diligence processes play a significant role in shaping how local organisations engage with INGOs and donors. While these systems are intended to ensure accountability, quality assurance, and risk management, they often introduce significant administrative burdens and unintentionally reinforce power imbalances.

Local partners across all three countries acknowledge the importance of compliance and due diligence. However, these processes are often resource intensive and disproportionately demanding, with systems largely designed around donor and INGO requirements with limited adaptation to local organisational capacities.

> ***'We learn best when the training is practical and connected to what we are doing.'***
>
> FGD participant, Kenya

Standardised tools and templates can provide useful structure, but are often externally designed and may not fully reflect local realities or information needs. They are primarily geared towards donor reporting rather than local learning or adaptive management.

A key cross-cutting finding is that compliance and due diligence systems reinforce asymmetrical power relations. Local partners are required to meet stringent reporting and documentation standards to access funding, while having limited influence over the design of these systems. Compliance functions not only as an accountability mechanism but also as an instrument of control.

On the positive side, emerging practices – including ongoing feedback mechanisms between local partners and INGOs, joint review meetings, and capacity-building efforts in safeguarding and monitoring – demonstrate that when compliance systems are accompanied by capacity strengthening, dialogue, and flexibility, they can contribute to organisational development rather than simply acting as control mechanisms.

3.6 MEAL systems

Across partners in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, MEAL systems are recognised as essential for tracking progress, ensuring accountability, and informing programme improvement. However, MEAL frameworks are seen as largely shaped by donor requirements, with local partners playing a stronger role in implementation and data collection than in system design and learning utilisation.

Strong local implementation, limited influence on structure and use

Local organisations demonstrate strong capacity in implementing MEAL processes at the community level. In Kenya, structured monitoring approaches are well embedded, with organisations using pre- and post-assessments, follow-up visits, and routine monitoring to track progress. In Uganda, MEAL is closely linked to organisational credibility and accountability. However, while data is collected by partners, those partners do not have influence over how it is used to improve systems or programmes for current or future cycles.

> ***'We are the ones collecting the data from the ground – but we are not always part of how it is used.'***
> FGD participant, Uganda

A consistent pattern emerges: local organisations play a critical role in generating and managing data at the implementation level but have limited influence over how MEAL systems are structured and used.

A recurring theme, therefore, is the perceived dominance of upward accountability within MEAL systems, often at the expense of local learning and adaptive management. Data is often collected and reported upward, with fewer mechanisms to ensure that insights are systematically fed back into programme design or community-level learning.

Emerging participatory MEAL approaches

While involvement in designing MEAL frameworks remains limited, there are emerging examples of more participatory approaches. In Kenya, feedback loops between local partners and INGOs suggest opportunities for more iterative learning and adaptation. In Uganda, partners cited capacity strengthening in monitoring systems as enabling local organisations to better manage and utilise MEAL processes. Where local partners are engaged beyond data collection, MEAL systems can become more responsive and relevant, but such practices remain inconsistent and are not yet institutionalised across the programme cycle.

3.7 The Role of INGOs and Dóchas member organisations

During discussions on the role of INGOs, perceptions are both positive and negative.

INGOs as enablers and connectors

Across all three countries, Dóchas member organisations and INGOs more broadly are positively perceived for their role in strengthening local capacity and providing technical expertise. In Kenya, training and knowledge transfer are perceived as enabling local organisations to implement locally relevant solutions. In Uganda, training and mentorship enable local organisations to cascade knowledge to communities and sustain interventions beyond project cycles.

> ***'When skills are transferred properly, the work continues even without the project.'***
>
> FGD participant, Uganda

INGOs are also recognised for their value as connectors. A participant in a workshop in Ethiopia highlighted how INGOs can bring together diverse local actors in a way that local organisations or even networks struggle to do. This is because they are seen as outsiders who stand apart from the internal competitive environment.

INGOs as intermediaries and gatekeepers

Despite positive contributions and improvements in equitable partnerships, INGOs are seen as continuing to function as intermediaries within the aid architecture and retaining significant control over financial resources and strategic priorities at the expense of local organisations. As mentioned, local organisations are required to meet extensive reporting and compliance requirements which, while ensuring accountability, also reinforce power imbalances within partnerships.

> ***'We implement what is already designed, even when we see that changes are needed.'***
>
> FGD participant, Uganda

Across contexts, this intermediary role positions INGOs as gatekeepers of both resources and decision-making. While local partners are recognised for their proximity and contextual knowledge, they are not equally empowered to shape the direction, financing, and governance of development interventions.

> ***'We are closest to the community, but far from where decisions are made.'***
>
> FGD participant

Alongside discussions on the role of intermediaries, one workshop also examined how partners define 'local' entities. Participants argued that INGOs that establish locally registered offices, but remain strategically directed by headquarters in the Global North, cannot be regarded as local organisations.

Emerging shifts towards collaborator role

There is growing evidence, across different country contexts, of Dóchas member organisations adopting more participatory and collaborative approaches. In Kenya, partners describe increasingly reciprocal engagement processes: regular feedback mechanisms, joint planning meetings, and a sense that member organisations no longer act as 'bosses' but value the voice of partners and the community.

> ***'There is more space now to discuss and adjust together.'***
>
> FGD participant, Kenya

In Uganda, long-term partnerships are identified as a key enabler of more equitable collaboration. Sustained engagement over multiple project cycles allows for trust building, improved communication, and gradual expansion of local roles.

> ***'When partnerships are long term, there is more trust and more space to contribute.'***
>
> Workshop participant, Uganda

Despite these positive shifts, co-creation remains uneven across contexts, as outlined in a number of sections above. Progress in this area will require more explicit tracking, including the extent to which local partners participate in agenda setting, lead programme design, influence resource allocation, and have access to flexible funding.

Chapter 4: Progress in the Shift Towards LLD – A Starting Point for Measuring Change

This chapter presents a suggested menu of metrics, emerging from the data and discussions presented above. It is perhaps the most directly actionable output of this study, aimed primarily at supporting Dóchas members to move to more locally led models of development. The menu is not exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point from which members, local partners, and donors can deepen discussions – a tool to build upon in order to strengthen measurement and accountability in the shift towards LLD. It incorporates and builds on some of the metrics currently used by some members, moving further beyond traditional programme-level indicators by incorporating dimensions of power, autonomy, and system-level change – a perceived gap identified in the research. These dimensions provide a more comprehensive basis for assessing progress towards LLD, ensuring that both operational effectiveness and structural change are captured.

It is not an exhaustive table and any indicators/ means of verification employed will need to be SMART and workable.

4.1 A menu of metrics

Table 3 presents the menu using nine dimensions emerging in the discussions. Dóchas encourages members to use this as a reference point for reviewing and strengthening existing MEAL frameworks, partnership assessments, and donor reporting. Indicators are not intended to be prescriptive, and may be adapted to local contexts and used selectively based on factors such as geography, objectives, or organisation type.

Table 3: A menu of metrics

Domain	What to measure	How to measure
Decision-making, influence and equitable partnerships	• Extent of local partner involvement in strategic decisions and programme design • Local partner influence over priority setting and resource allocation • Degree of shared decision-making between INGO and local partner • Degree of local partner participation/ influence on sector-level coordination and policy platforms • Evidence INGOs ensure/promote visibility of local partners	• Percentage of programmes where local partners influence concept development and design • Percentage of programmes led by local partners across project cycle • Evidence of changes in programme priorities based on local partner input • Proportion of key decisions made jointly between INGO and partner (e.g. ≥80%) • Documentation of joint planning processes and co-created priorities • Number and level of decision-making fora, where INGO is active, held for local partner • Number of local partner engagements in national/ regional forums • Evidence of local partner contributions to policy or coordination outcomes • Number of times local partner put forward by INGO for public, stakeholder or media engagement • Number of times local partner credited for programme impact

Domain	What to measure	How to measure
Financing and resource allocation	• Proportion of funding directly managed and controlled by local partner • Degree of flexibility in use of funds and reasonable budget adjustment during implementation • Predictability and duration of funding for local partner • Equality of overhead funding between INGO and local partner • Transparency of overall budgets between INGO and local partner • Accessibility of funding to local partner, e.g. simplified, language-sensitive funding applications • Access to direct financing and funding for local partner	• Percentage of INGO funding passed to local partners • Annual increases in grant to partner ratios • Percentage of total active project budgets controlled by local partners • Percentage of funding provided as multi-year commitments • Percentage of indirect/overhead costs allocated to local partners • Average duration of partner funding agreements • Number of budget reallocations approved annually • Percentage of programmes where local partner has visibility of total budget • Number of funding applications accepted in local languages • Number of context-appropriate funding application templates
Risk Sharing	• Distribution of financial, operational, reputational, and security risk	• Percentage of partner contracts with risk-sharing clauses including, e.g., adaptive clauses, sharing of currency fluctuations, sharing of costs on insurance mechanisms • Percentage of projects requiring co-funding or pre-financing by local partners • Average number of days of pre-financing required by partners • Number of partnerships with co-designed risk management frameworks

Domain	What to measure	How to measure
Capacity strengthening and organisational development	• Evidence that organisational development is core objective of partnership • Strength of governance, MEAL, and operational systems • Strength of financial management systems • Development of locally owned systems and policies • Evidence of local partner ability to manage programmes independently • Evidence of INGO facilitating local partner access to direct financing • Evidence organisational development is leading to greater autonomy • Degree of progression in organisational maturity of local partners	• Results from organisational capacity assessments • Number of partnership contracts including organisational development • Number of contracts with provision for flexible organisational development budget lines • Percentage of local partner policies developed internally (e.g. ≥70%) • Evidence of reduced reliance on INGO support • Percentage of local partner financing coming from direct grants or other forms of funding • Audit results; quality of financial reporting; compliance scores • Movement of local partners across defined capacity or maturity levels over time
Compliance and reporting	• Evidence of improved accessibility in compliance and reporting for local partners • Scaled requirements based on funding amounts • Presence of harmonised tools for partnership assessments and due diligence	• Evidence of clear and graduated compliance requirements for partners • Number of due diligence passporting agreements joined
Sustainability	• Evidence of continuity of programmes after funding ends • Level of integration into local systems	• Percentage of initiatives continuing post-project • Percentage of projects including ex-post evaluation plans • Evidence of handover or institutionalisation within local structures

Domain	What to measure	How to measure
MEAL and adaptation	• Use of locally produced data for programme adaptation • Inclusion of locally relevant indicators in MEAL systems • Balance between accountability and learning • Functionality of feedback loops	• Percentage of indicators co-designed with local partners • Number of documented programme changes based on monitoring data • Evidence of internal reflection processes vs reporting outputs • Number of decisions influenced by community feedback
Transparency and accountability	• Evidence of two-way accountability mechanisms • Responsiveness to community feedback	• Presence of systems for both upward and downward accountability • Reported stakeholder perceptions of trust, transparency, and collaboration • Evidence of shared responsibilities and mutual accountability • Percentage of feedback addressed or acted upon
Community ownership and accountability	• Level of community leadership in initiatives • Community perception of success and relevance • Evidence of community involvement in monitoring and evaluation	• Percentage of programmes with community members engaged in programme planning, activities, and MEAL • Number and functionality of community-led structures

This framework should be read alongside the findings in previous chapters, which provide the evidence base from which these metrics were derived. Chapter 5 sets out the recommendations for how members and donors can operationalise this framework in practice.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this study demonstrate that LLD is increasingly recognised across the Dóchas membership as an important direction of travel, both within organisational policy frameworks and in partnership practice. Local partners across all three countries acknowledge positive shifts in engagement – particularly through stronger emphasis on participation, community engagement, inclusion, and recognition of local knowledge. There is also recognition of improvements made in flexibility and financing.

However, perspectives put forward suggest that progress towards LLD remains uneven and is generally stronger at the implementation level than at the levels of governance, financing, and strategic decision-making. Participation has expanded more rapidly than influence, creating a gap between the aspirations of LLD and the realities of partnership practice. Local partners consistently associate genuine LLD with greater local ownership, stronger voice and influence in governance structures, more balanced transparency and accountability, greater financial autonomy, and recognition of local partners as strategic actors rather than primarily as implementers.

Other key points include the following:

- Local partners perceive most current funding systems as characterised by short cycles, rigid structures, complex compliance requirements often unsuited to local contexts or funding amounts, delayed disbursements, and limited direct access to resources. These arrangements reinforce dependence on intermediary structures and limit local autonomy.
- Financial and operational risks are perceived as disproportionately transferred to local organisations without corresponding authority over resources or programme decisions.
- While important progress has been made in the participation of women and marginalised groups within programmes and community structures, inclusion remains stronger at the community and implementation levels than within higher-level decision-making spaces.
- Existing MEAL frameworks for local partners remain largely oriented towards upward accountability to donors and INGOs. In relation to LLD, few use indicators that measure more transformational shifts in equitable partnerships or accountability to communities.

By prioritising local leadership, fostering mutual accountability, investing in long-term organisation development, and embedding locally defined indicators of success within partnership and MEAL systems, both DFAT Ireland and Dóchas members can move closer to development approaches that are more responsive, equitable, locally grounded, and sustainable.

Efforts to move towards LLD will remain constrained within existing structures and accountability systems without further work on encouraging change and tracking corresponding progress. Perspectives from local partners gathered in this study reinforce the value of measurement that includes:

- locally informed and partnership-oriented metrics that assess relational and transformative dimensions of LLD

- metrics that assess financial autonomy, predictability, flexibility, and local influence over budget decisions
- metrics that assess reconfiguration of roles, responsibilities, and power across the development ecosystem, and position local CSOs not only as implementers but as co-architects of development processes.

The menu of metrics presented in Table 3, Chapter 4, is aimed at furthering discussions between DFAT Ireland and Dóchas members in this regard.

Table 4: Recommendations

Recommendations are directed at two audiences: 1. DFAT Ireland and donor governments, and 2. Dóchas members and INGOs.

Table 4 outlines recommendations for each.

Shared – DFAT Ireland and Dóchas members
Consider the use of a range of metrics, some of which are outlined in **Table 3, Chapter 4**, that promote and support the shift towards LLD. Adopt a **continuum approach** that supports INGOs and local partners to move through a progressive, transformational process towards full LLD. The **LLD Maturity Framework in Annex 1** was developed during the project for this purpose. It is intended as a tool to support donors, Dóchas members, and other stakeholders to further strengthen efforts in moving to locally led models of development.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
LLD policy and guidance	Work with Dóchas members to further incentivise and support the move towards LLD models. With reductions in development funding globally, the efficiency and sustainability of LLD programming is more essential than ever in achieving development goals. Discussions could include the definition of policy objectives with local stakeholders. Incorporate tangible LLD metrics into calls for proposals, and ensure grants include mutually defined indicators that measure not only on-granting, but also local partner ownership of budgets.	Build on progress made to date in a consistent manner, including the translation of commitments into policies, strategies, and monitoring for medium- to long-term transformation. Take a propositional approach with donors, including in programmes such as the ICSP and CSF, to develop frameworks that facilitate more flexible and timely funding, equitable partnerships, shared decision-making, risk-sharing mechanisms, and consistent metrics for LLD.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
Financing and resource allocation	Build on funding mechanisms that prioritise timely, flexible, multi-year financing, enabling Dóchas members to work with local organisations to plan strategically, adapt to contextual realities aligned with local priorities, and sustain interventions beyond short project cycles. Consider extending aspects of ICSP provisions for flexible funding to CSF partners. Increase direct funding opportunities for local partners and reduce reliance on intermediary funding arrangements that limit local autonomy. Explore additional direct funding using channels such as the embassies and local/national networks. Explore ways to ensure a reduction of pre-financing burdens on local partners. Ensure that flexible approaches are designed and tracked to allow them flow down through intermediaries to local partners across a range of contexts.	Actively facilitate and support local partners to access direct funding and to explore diversification of funding, including domestic resource mobilisation. Include specific clauses in partnership agreements to promote greater flexibility in budget lines. Ensure clear and consistent cost recovery allocations within project budgets for local partners that support organisational self-sufficiency. Where relevant, connect this to local partner-defined capacity strengthening opportunities that can be supported through the partnership. Reduce barriers to funding for local CSOs, by designing context-specific, simplified funding applications including in local languages.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
Decision-making, power and influence	Design flexible budget mechanisms and metrics to promote adaptability and accountability to the evolving needs, interests, and capacities of local stakeholders during the project life cycle. Promote greater local leadership and decision-making, ensuring local partners participate meaningfully across the full priority setting and programme cycle, including strategic planning, programme design, budgeting, implementation, and evaluation.	Institutionalise co-creation across the programme cycle, enabling local partner influence over priority setting, strategic direction, programmes, and resources. Build on partnership agreements to allow partners to take greater control of priority setting, programme design, resources, implementation, and evaluation.
Capacity strengthening, organisation development, systems strengthening	Increase percentage of budgets allowed for long-term, systems-based institutional strengthening that goes beyond short-term, compliance-focused capacity building, focusing on governance, leadership, financial management, MEAL systems, and organisational resilience.	Build on progress made in capacity strengthening, tailoring efforts to local contexts, adopting demand-driven and context-sensitive approaches that respond to priorities identified by local partners. Partners in this study have identified the need to focus on long-term organisational resilience, leadership development, governance, and sustainability over donor compliance requirements. Ensure mutual organisation development is specified as an objective in partnership agreements.
Risk sharing	Explore risk sharing with INGOs across its various dimensions (e.g. financial, operational, safety and security, reputational) and how risk can be shared more equitably between donors, INGOs, and local partners.	In conjunction with DFAT Ireland and other donors, explore and track progress on practical risk-sharing mechanisms, including clauses in partnership and funding agreements that allow for negotiation and sharing over transfer.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
Compliance and due diligence	Work with Dóchas members to provide guidance and create systems that reduce the burden of due diligence and compliance for CSOs. Design funding programmes (e.g. for ICSP, CSF) that facilitate embedding initiatives such as due diligence passporting and other harmonisation tools. Ensure tools such as due diligence passporting mechanisms do not entrench externally imposed risk frameworks, but instead create opportunities for dialogue on equitable risk sharing. Beyond the reduction of duplication, programmes should allow for balancing accountability with long-term development of local systems, including simplified, scaled, and proportionate requirements aligned with the capacities of local organisations. Gather feedback from local partners on donor due diligence requirements and map the accessibility of these requirements for organisations serving the furthest behind communities. Work with other funders, e.g. other Irish government departments, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), and philanthropists, to adopt useful tools and initiatives.	Build on existing practical initiatives including the creation of simplified and tiered partner assessment and due diligence requirements, with an emphasis on removing compliance barriers for smaller and grassroots organisations.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
MEAL	Build on programme funding frameworks (ICSP, CSF) to encourage MEAL systems that prioritise learning, adaptation, and locally defined indicators over a focus on upward accountability, and promote decision-making at the local level.	Work with local partners to develop context-appropriate MEAL frameworks that capture local knowledge, use locally-relevant indicators, and promote programme effectiveness and local ownership.
National and local networks	Integrate national and local network priorities into geographically targeted calls for proposals.	Engage with and support local and national networks that promote the move to LLD and practical initiatives to advance progress.
Partner types – CSO diversity and evolution	Build into the design of funding programmes the ability to differentiate and recognise the diversity of local CSO partners, their varying needs and capacities, and evolution over time.	Further develop a differentiated offer to local CSOs according to needs, context, partner type, evolution, and entity.
Partner types – beyond CSOs	Develop clear benchmarks for enabling and supporting other types of local partners, including the private sector, local authorities, and academia/research and learning institutions.	Develop an approach to working with non-CSO partners and a concept of what success would look like for each type of partner relationship.
Community ownership and accountability	Allow sufficient resources and flexibility for ICSP, strategic and CSF partners to strengthen community ownership and sustainability by deepening investment in community-level systems, structures, and leadership mechanisms that can sustain interventions over time. Incorporate specific metrics into calls for proposals that prioritise local stakeholder accountability and value for money, and assess performance against targets defined by the local community.	Work with DFAT Ireland and donors on strengthening community ownership and sustainability by deepening investment in community-level systems, structures, and leadership mechanisms that can sustain interventions over time. Ensure communities are active participants in priority setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Area	DFAT Ireland and donor governments	Dóchas members and INGOs
Role of the INGO	Explore with Dóchas members the role of the INGO as an enabler, connector and collaborator for local partners, and what this means in practice for the design of future funding programmes Encourage INGOs to track their progress against LLD continuums, both internally and with local stakeholder input.	Continue to refine and redefine roles incrementally, in a way that supports the shift to local partner leadership – adopting facilitative roles that strengthen rather than substitute local systems.

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Annex 1: The LLD Maturity Framework

Findings from this research suggests that members and local partners see LLD as a progression that could be articulated in advancement through a number of stages of transformation. The LLD Maturity Framework sets out four stages of progression, from participation through to autonomy, under seven domains relating to strategy, design and decision-making; resource distribution; systems and institutional capacity; community accountability; evidence, learning, and action; partnership approach; and organisational sustainability.

Domain	Locally led partnership maturity benchmarks			
	1: Participation	**2: Co-creation**	**3: Leadership**	**4: Autonomy**
Strategy, design & decision-making	Local Partners are invited into planning discussions after many priorities have already been established. They provide feedback, identify risks, and share local concerns but have limited influence over programme design, funding allocation, or strategic direction. Activities and implementation targets are largely predefined by the INGO or donor.	Local Partners contribute solutions during design discussions before plans are finalised. Decision-making, work planning, and adaptive responses are increasingly shared. Local knowledge is used to avoid programme designs that overlook community realities, and the INGO actively creates opportunities for Local Partner input before key decisions are made.	Local Partners lead consortia, steering committees, and joint governance spaces. They influence policy, programme direction, and resource decisions, can respond when community needs shift, and negotiate from a stronger position in long-term partnerships. The INGO intentionally shares decision-making authority, creates opportunities for leadership, and removes barriers to locally led action.	Local Partners set their own strategy and invite external actors into locally defined priorities. They maintain independent decision-making over priorities, governance, and programme direction, and develop and scale programmes based on locally identified needs. The INGO participates by invitation, contributing expertise, resources, relationships, or technical support where requested and where it adds value.
Resource distribution	Local Partners receive project funding primarily through intermediaries and often have limited visibility over total budgets, overheads, or funding flows. Budgets are highly restricted, disbursement schedules are fixed, cost recovery is limited, and compliance or results-based financing pressures are often absorbed without equivalent control over resources. Financial decisions are largely determined by donors and INGOs.	Local Partners participate in budget development and can question assumptions, procurement plans, and delivery schedules. They have some flexibility in expenditure decisions and can discuss co-funding requirements before agreements are finalised. The INGO increases transparency and supports more realistic discussions about costs, risks, and delivery expectations.	Local Partners increasingly access funding directly from donors or pooled mechanisms, not only through intermediaries. They maintain reserves or unrestricted funds to manage timing gaps and protect programme continuity. Multi-year or predictable funding supports planning and continuity. The INGO actively shares funding opportunities, facilitates donor relationships, and assumes greater responsibility for reducing financial barriers and dependency.	Local Partners maintain diversified funding portfolios through donor funding, domestic resource mobilisation, local philanthropy, private sector engagement, CSR, or income generation where relevant. No single donor or intermediary represents a dominant share of organisational value, and financial strategy is determined internally. The INGO supports partner-defined financing priorities and provides assistance only where requested.

Domain	Locally led partnership maturity benchmarks			
	1: Participation	**2: Co-creation**	**3: Leadership**	**4: Autonomy**
Systems & institutional capacity	Basic systems exist but are shaped primarily by external compliance, audits, and reporting requirements. Significant reliance remains on external technical, administrative, or proposal support. Capacity strengthening is often training oriented and linked to project delivery rather than organisational priorities.	Core governance and management systems are functioning and strengthened through jointly agreed plans. Capacity support responds to locally identified needs, not only donor reporting standards. Training, mentorship, and technical support help organisations run better, not just report better. The INGO supports capability development that aligns with partner priorities.	Local Partners independently manage finance, human resource (HR), procurement, safeguarding, governance, and MEAL systems for agreed programmes. They provide technical support, mentoring, or practical guidance to peer organisations and share good practice through networks, learning events, and consortium roles. The INGO increasingly acts as a connector, broker, and source of specialised support rather than the primary holder of expertise.	Local Partners are recognised as centres of excellence within their context or sector. They develop, review, and adapt their own systems without external technical support and sustain institutional capacity across leadership transitions, funding cycles, and changing programme demands. The INGO provides technical services, accompaniment, or surge support only where requested and where it adds value.
Community accountability	Community feedback is collected periodically through meetings, complaints systems, or consultations. Inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups is primarily externally required or defined. Feedback is documented but may not yet influence higher-level decisions.	Communities are consulted during planning and review processes, including the identification of vulnerable groups. Community feedback is discussed with programme teams and used to adjust activities. Inclusion is actively practised rather than treated solely as a donor requirement. The INGO supports more meaningful participation in programme decisions and accountability processes.	Community representatives hold formal governance, oversight, or accountability roles. Accountability flows in multiple directions: to communities, Local Partners and donors. Vulnerable groups participate in decisions that affect them, rather than only implementation activities. The INGO creates space for community leadership and advocates for the inclusion and rights of marginalised groups in local and sectoral spaces.	Communities drive priority-setting and accountability processes. Community members can raise concerns and see documented responses or changes. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, and marginalised groups influence leadership, resource allocation, and decision-making. The INGO responds to community-defined priorities and accountability mechanisms rather than prescribing them.
Evidence, learning & action	Monitoring data is collected primarily to satisfy donor and external MEAL requirements. Compliance burdens are largely defined externally and reporting often takes priority over reflection, adaptation, and community learning.	Joint reflection and learning processes are in place. Compliance requirements, tools, and templates are discussed and agreed where possible. Local Partners provide feedback on proposals, data, and findings, and receive feedback in return. The INGO supports learning as a shared process rather than a reporting exercise.	Evidence, learning products, and practical examples are generated and shared with others. MEAL findings influence programme design, accountability, and resource decisions. Evidence and community feedback are used to adapt programmes while maintaining compliance requirements. The INGO creates space for locally led learning and supports partners to use evidence in strategic decision-making.	Locally relevant knowledge influences practice, policy, and sector learning. Success is defined from local and community perspectives. Data informs strategic decisions, programme design, and community-level outcomes. The INGO contributes technical support, learning resources, or specialist expertise where requested, while respecting locally defined priorities and measures of success.

Domain	Locally led partnership maturity benchmarks			
	1: Participation	**2: Co-creation**	**3: Leadership**	**4: Autonomy**
Partnership approach	The INGO brings in Local Partners to participate in coordination forums, sector meetings, and policy spaces as sources of information. They share local experience but have limited influence over decisions, and representation often depends on invitation by external actors.	The INGO ensures space for Local Partners to contribute to policy discussions, technical working groups, and local coordination processes. Community priorities and implementation evidence inform sector conversations, and partners begin to be recognised as more than implementers by the INGO.	The INGO advocates for Local Partners to chair networks, alliances, and coordination bodies. It champions Local Partners to influence sector practice, policy discussions, and coordination outcomes, using evidence from communities and programmes to shape decisions. The INGO amplifies partner leadership and helps remove barriers to influence, access, and visibility.	The INGO offers support and services to Local Partners who shape policy, set programmatic standards, and influence national development agendas. The INGO contributes resources, relationships, or convening support where requested, without positioning itself as the primary voice.
Organisational sustainability	Local Partner sustainability depends on a small number of externally driven projects or donors. Programme continuity is vulnerable to short funding cycles, delayed disbursement, and rigid funding conditions. Strategy is shaped largely by available project funding.	Local Partners contribute to strategic planning and resource mobilisation. They explore domestic resource mobilisation, local philanthropy, CSR, private sector engagement, and income-generation opportunities. Longer-term partnership discussions increasingly focus on sustainability and continuity. The INGO supports planning beyond individual project cycles.	Programmes continue beyond individual grants and attract diverse partnerships. Community structures, services, and advocacy efforts continue after donor-funded activities end. Credibility and evidence are increasingly used to secure repeat funding and new partnerships. The INGO prioritises continuity, relationship-building, and long-term resilience over short-term project delivery.	Long-term organisational viability is not dependent on a single donor, intermediary, or programme. Local Partners determine their own development pathway and financing choices. Impact is sustained through locally owned institutions, diversified resources, and strong community accountability. The INGO supports partner-defined pathways to sustainability and independence, contributing where it can add value rather than directing the journey.

Annex 2: Methodology

This annex provides a summary of the methodological approach underpinning the study. The full methodology was designed and implemented by the Vashi Impact Group (VIG).

Overall approach

The study adopted a qualitative and participatory methodology, grounded in participatory research principles, and designed to generate rich, contextually grounded insights rather than statistically representative findings. The research constituted a qualitative inquiry exploring the perspectives, experiences, and beliefs of local civil society partners regarding what constitutes meaningful progress towards LLD.

The study was conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda – countries selected both because they host a significant number of Dóchas member organisations and their local partners, and for logistical and operational reasons that made in-country consultations feasible within the scope of the assignment. Participation in the study was voluntary, with a number of Dóchas member organisations with operations in the three countries volunteering to take part. An intentional effort was made to engage a cross-section of local partner types, including established national organisations, community-based organisations, cooperatives, and women-led structures operating across different thematic and geographic contexts.

The study focused primarily on development-oriented partnerships, while recognising that in practice, the boundaries between development and humanitarian work are often fluid – particularly in contexts characterised by recurrent shocks, displacement, and livelihood insecurity.

Inception phase

The inception phase began with a kick-off meeting with Dóchas and a small steering group of members and the Secretariat to align stakeholders and clarify objectives. This was followed by a light desk review of Dóchas members' LLD policies, relevant national frameworks, donor policies, and global best practices. Initial consultations with member organisations provided valuable input that strengthened the conceptualisation of the study. A study matrix was developed linking research objectives, questions, and methods.

Secondary data collection

A detailed and targeted desk review was undertaken to generate secondary evidence on how Dóchas members approach and measure LLD. The review focused on organisational policies, partnership frameworks, MEAL systems, donor reporting requirements, and relevant global guidance and literature on LLD. It prioritised Dóchas members with participating local partners (ActionAid Ireland, Aidlink, Brighter Communities Worldwide, Children in Crossfire, GOAL Global, Misean Cara, Self Help Africa, Sightsavers Ireland) alongside a number of organisations involved in the Dóchas LLD Working Group.

Additional inputs were obtained from Concern Worldwide, Trócaire, World Vision Ireland, and Plan International Ireland. The review process remained iterative, incorporating emerging documents and updated materials throughout the study period. Analytical frameworks used as reference tools included the DFAT Australia Locally Led Development Continuum and selected OECD frameworks. These informed analytical framing rather than serving as formal assessment benchmarks.

Primary data collection

Key informant interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured KIIs were conducted with focal points from 11 Dóchas member organisations to capture strategic, policy, and funding perspectives on LLD. Themes included ownership, agency, power dynamics, financial sustainability, representation, governance arrangements, and accountability mechanisms.

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were conducted with local partner organisations across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. A total of 28 local partner organisations were engaged, with each FGD comprising 4–6 participants primarily from senior management, programme staff, and MEAL units. One FGD was organised per local partner – partners were not brought together in shared sessions – so that issues could be discussed contextually and to preserve confidentiality. Discussions explored practical experiences of LLD including decision-making processes, access to and control of resources, financial sustainability, and representation within partnerships.

Participatory workshops

In-person workshops were conducted in each of the three countries to deepen engagement with local partners and validate emerging findings. These workshops brought together diverse local partners who had participated in FGDs, and applied participatory tools to co-develop contextually relevant success factors and indicators.

Data quality, ethics, analysis and anonymity

All FGDs and KIIs were held virtually. Interviews were recorded with participant consent to support accurate transcription and analysis. Transcripts were translated where necessary, anonymised, and systematically compiled. Data was securely managed using encrypted digital platforms with access restricted to authorised team members.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, perspectives, and experiences. Comparative analysis examined similarities and differences across countries and organisational types. Qualitative data from the desk review and primary consultations were triangulated to strengthen credibility and analytical depth.

All stages of the assignment were conducted in line with high ethical and safeguarding standards, prioritising informed consent, confidentiality, inclusivity, and participant well-being. The approach was aligned with the IASC (2023) Guidance on Participation and Localisation, OECD Development Assistance Committee standards, and the Dóchas Code of Conduct.

Quality assurance was overseen by the Steering Committee, comprising representatives from Dóchas, Self Help Africa, and Children in Crossfire. Double-coding was applied to qualitative data analysis to enhance consistency and reduce bias.

Annex 3: Participating Dóchas Member Organisations

Organisation
ActionAid Ireland
AidLink
Brighter Communities Worldwide
Children in Crossfire
Concern Worldwide
GOAL Global
Misean Cara
Self Help Africa (SHA)
Sightsavers Ireland
Trócaire
World Vision Ireland

Annex 4: Participating Local Partner Organisations

Dóchas member	Partner organisation	Country
ActionAid	ActionAid Kenya	Kenya
ActionAid	Kamuthe Women's Network	Kenya
ActionAid	Sauti Ya Wanawake	Kenya
AidLink	Girl Child Network (GCN)	Kenya
Brighter Communities	Brighter Communities Kenya	Kenya
Brighter Communities	Community Health Promoters Group	Kenya
Brighter Communities	Chemobei Widows Group	Kenya
Brighter Communities	Climate Change Ambassadors	Kenya
Misean Cara	Haki Yetu	Kenya
SHA	Crescent SACCO	Kenya
SHA	Farming Systems Kenya	Kenya
ActionAid	ActionAid Ethiopia	Ethiopia
ActionAid	Ethiopia Women Rights Advocates (EWRA)	Ethiopia
Children in Crossfire	Ethiopia Centre for Development (ECDev)	Ethiopia
Children in Crossfire	Maedot	Ethiopia
GOAL	Center of Concern (COC)	Ethiopia
GOAL	Mothers and Children Multisectoral Development Organization (MCMDO)	Ethiopia
SHA	Yenestanet Fana Savings & Credit Union	Ethiopia
SHA	Tinsaye	Ethiopia
SHA	Raya Wakerai	Ethiopia
SHA	Meki Batu	Ethiopia

Dóchas member	Partner organisation	Country
SHA	Tegulet	Ethiopia
AidLink	Action for Rural Women's Empowerment (ARUWE)	Uganda
GOAL	Facilitation for Innovations and Sustainable Productivity (FINASP)	Uganda
GOAL	FOKAPAWA Uganda	Uganda
Misean Cara	Youth Live Uganda	Uganda
Sightsavers	National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU)	Uganda
Sightsavers	National Union of Women with Disability of Uganda (NUWODU)	Uganda

Photo Credits

Cover image: Kenya. Communities take part in World Elder Abuse awareness day in Kilifi with Haki Yetu, a local partner of Misean Cara. Credit: Haki Yetu

Page 2: Ethiopia. Livestock are vaccinated in Goloda District in East Hararghe Zone with the support of GOAL and local partners. Credit: GOAL Ethiopia

Page 33: Kenya. (L-R) Lydia Mwamberi, Phoebe Mwamburi and Sylvia Mwanyuma outside their office in Wundanyi, Taita Taveta. Partners of ActionAid Kenya, Sauti Ya Wanawake Wundanyi is a grassroots women's rights organisation fighting against gender based violence in the community. Credit: ActionAid Kenya

Pages 37: Kenya. Local Partners discuss success factors of locally led development during a workshop led by Dóchas and Vashi Impact Group in Nairobi, March 2026. Credit: Dóchas

Page 39: Kenya. In partnership with Brighter Communities Worldwide, a new Trauma Centre was opened in Londiani in response to a tragic crash that claimed 52 lives in November 2025. It now brings essential emergency care to a community that once had none. Credit: Dr. Hisham Khatir/BCW

Page 40. Uganda. Muwugumya Knighty, a tailoring entrepreneur from Nwoya district who has had a disability since childhood, makes and supplies school uniforms. She also trains others, including people with disabilities, with the support of Sightsavers Ireland and local partners. Credit: Sightsavers Ireland

Page 42: Kenya. Girl Child Network (GCN), a partner of Aidlink, manages the Let Children Learn project in Turkana. Deputy CEO Dennis Mutiso and Project Coordinator Lucy celebrate the launch with community members in Turkana South. Credit: GCN/Aidlink dóchas The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations

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