

DUTCH
RELIEF
ALLIANCE

GRAND BARGAIN 3.0:

The story of the Dutch Relief Alliance



Dutch Relief Alliance and the Grand Bargain Commitments

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Paulin Bisha Kabaya and Stephania Noel in the Democratic Republic of Congo elaborate on the nitty gritty of locally led responses. One of the issues they mention is that despite the many positive changes they see, change in the conditions is much slower. "We only have one-year contracts, and even getting those can be delayed."

Shahabuddin Hamdard, Riaz Wali, and Sayed Qais Hussaini talk about the 'crisis that never stops' in Afghanistan. As so many colleagues elsewhere, they have learnt to make the most of little resources and where key responders have left the country, working through their networks with local communities.

An honest reflection with points of improvement as well as a lot of genuine praise: "For most organisations the idea of localisation is still at the beginner's level. But with the Dutch Relief Alliance experience, we have realised milestones".

Amjad Elbashir' interview leaves no doubt that locally led responses are the only way in a crisis where people cannot be reached by aid organisations. He shows the long way to go to bring other international NGOs fully on board with this agenda, and to continue to find creative ways to support the miniscule community-based organisations that have the power to help, but not to write reports.

This interview from Ethiopia mentions a mental shift to step away from persistent power imbalances between international and 'local' partners. They notice that some organisations in Ethiopia still have a 'donor is the boss' mentality.

Two reflections on the many learnings that have been part of the Alliance's development, amongst others about the importance of language and the need to find a decolonised vocabulary to talk about partnership and humanitarian aid.

Locally led, how?

Throughout the publication: mini-interviews

This publication is a dazzling read that shows how people grounded in the realities of crisis-response are not only ready to make decisions and flexibly implement programmes, but also advance as the thought-leaders of the humanitarian community. Amidst major concerns about the most devastating budget-cut in development cooperation that the Netherlands is foreseeing, the Dutch Relief Alliance has much to be proud of and show for.

Dorothea Hilhorst

Locally led, how?

Empowering locally led aid through subsidiarity and inclusion



Ghulam Sakhi Gulam
Board Advisor, OHW,
Afghanistan Protracted
Crisis Joint Response

In Afghanistan, locally led aid is crucial to ensuring effectiveness and sustainability. The context here demands approaches fully grounded in local realities. In my view, the most effective way to implement locally led aid in Afghanistan is by fully embracing a subsidiarity approach. This means not just involving local communities and organisations in discussions, but actually handing over meaningful decision-making power and resources to them. This requires abandoning perceptions of limited capacity, and recognising that grassroots organisations often possess skills exceeding international NGOs in community engagement. I believe that Afghan partners, who truly understand the local context, should lead the way in designing and delivering aid. By simplifying procedures and decentralising decisions, we can ensure that aid reaches those who need it most.

For me, it's crucial that we focus on building the long-term capacities of local organisations. This will enable them to become resilient and self-sufficient in managing aid projects. I also see the value in utilising existing local governance structures to coordinate efforts, as this will ensure that the impact of our work is maximised through inclusive and community-driven processes.

What I'm advocating for is a multipronged approach—one that includes flexible funding, capacity building, and a shared commitment to managing risks. This approach would empower Afghan communities to take the lead. And international donors and NGOs would play a supportive role. By adopting a subsidiarity model, we can ensure that aid is not only more effective but also more sustainable and relevant to the needs of the people it's meant to serve. I truly believe that by empowering Afghans to be the drivers of their own recovery and well-being, we can make a lasting difference.



ABOUT DUTCH RELIEF ALLIANCE

The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) was formed in 2015 to address the rising number of humanitarian crises and the growing impact on people worldwide. Dutch humanitarian NGOs, in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, joined forces to provide emergency relief to people affected by wars, natural disasters, and conflicts globally. The Alliance's vision is a world where people affected by crises are at the centre of a humanitarian response that saves lives, alleviates suffering, restores dignity, and contributes to resilience. Their mission is to work with those most in need, providing a timely, efficient, and high-quality humanitarian response through equitable partnerships.

Since its inception, the Dutch Relief Alliance has provided aid to millions in over 45 global crises, partnering with more than 100 local organisations. The alliance is driven by a commitment to put the Grand Bargain principles into action, implementing commitments such as localisation, multi-year funding, accountability, and community engagement. In 2023, the Alliance reached over 3 million people in 11 countries and regions, including Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Gaza.

The members

The current members of the alliance are CARE Nederland, Cordaid, Dorcas, Oxfam Novib, Plan International, Save the Children, Red een Kind, SOS Kinderdorpen, Stichting Vluchteling, Tearfund NL, Terre des Hommes, War Child, World Vision, and ZOA. Together, the Alliance is working with 93 local partners in their current humanitarian responses.

Joint Responses

The Dutch Relief Alliance addresses crises through 'Joint Responses', tailored and executed by the most suitable partners for each situation. These responses are categorised as either Protracted Crisis Joint Responses, with a long-term focus, or Acute Crisis Joint Responses, which last about 6 months.

An Acute Crisis Joint Response ensures that aid is mobilised within 72 hours of a disaster. In 2023, such a rapid response was seen after the earthquake in Afghanistan and the floods in Somalia. DRA, in collaboration with those affected, governments, and local aid organisations, prioritised support for those in greatest need—typically children, women, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

For Protracted Crisis Joint Responses, the Alliance focuses on regions plagued by ongoing conflict, such as Syria and DR Congo. Farming families receive livestock and seeds to rebuild their livelihoods. Children are supported in coping with trauma, helping them sleep peacefully again. Essential infrastructure like water pipes, sewers, schools, and hospitals are repaired, enabling communities to recover and families to regain their independence.

Acute Crisis Joint Responses:

- Chad (Sudanese refugees, conflict)
- Somalia (Flood)
- Haiti (Conflict, displacement)
- Sudan (Famine)
- Myanmar (Conflict)
- Gaza (Conflict)

Protracted Crisis Joint Responses:

- Afghanistan
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Ethiopia
- South Sudan
- Sudan
- Somalia
- Syria Government Controlled Areas
- Syria Non-Government Controlled Areas
- Yemen

Locally led, how?

Advancing humanitarian aid in Chad through Strategic Partnerships



Mina Ngandoho

Director of Programs and Projects, OTOBPFE, Chad Acute Crisis Joint Response

Honestly, I believe that the localisation of humanitarian aid should no longer be treated by international actors as merely 'a matter of common sense'. Instead, it should be viewed as a critical indicator of commitment to a paradigm shift. Or at the very least as 'a cornerstone of strategic partnership'. My country, Chad, has faced a complex and often overlooked multidimensional crisis for years, with more than a third of the population needing humanitarian assistance. In such a context, I'm convinced that only a genuine strategic partnership agreement between international actors and local partners can offer a viable solution.

For me, it's clear that real change can only come through such an agreement. This means fully integrating the resources and local knowledge of Chadian partners with the experience and capacities of international organisations. By doing so, we can collectively bring about effective, sustainable, and high-quality change.

I strongly believe that the Dutch Relief Alliance should continue to invest in strengthening the institutional capacities of local actors. But more importantly, they should establish direct and sustainable strategic partnerships with these local actors, moving beyond simple, time-limited project implementation agreements. It's through such enduring, strategic collaborations that we can hope to make a lasting impact in Chad.

Locally led, how?

Advancing locally led aid in Yemen



Odai Al-Hamli

Grants and Programs Manager, SDF, Yemen Protracted Crisis Joint Response

In my view, ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of locally led aid in Yemen requires a comprehensive approach. First and foremost, it's crucial to build the capacity of local organisations through targeted training and mentorship. This will equip them to take the lead in responding to the country's needs. Additionally, forging strong partnerships between local and international actors is essential for sharing knowledge and optimising resources. Flexible funding mechanisms are also key, allowing local organisations to adapt and respond to evolving challenges. Finally, creating an environment that supports these efforts—through policy reforms and the reduction of bureaucratic barriers—is vital for long-term sustainability.

To truly enhance locally led aid in Yemen, I believe we need a fundamental shift towards genuine partnership. International organisations must move away from a top-down approach and instead prioritise local leadership and ownership. By transferring decision-making power, providing sufficient resources, and building trust, we can create an environment where local actors are empowered to effectively tackle Yemen's complex challenges and build lasting resilience.

THE GRAND BARGAIN 3.0: FROM GENEVA TO GOMA



The humanitarian landscape is constantly changing, bringing new challenges that require innovative solutions. The Grand Bargain, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, has been a key framework for making aid more effective, efficient, and accountable. As of 2024, the Grand Bargain has entered its third phase, known as Grand Bargain 3.0: 'From Geneva to Goma.' This phase reflects a shift from global promises to real impact on the ground.

Grand Bargain 3.0 builds on earlier versions. It brings together 68 signatories—donor governments, NGOs, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and intergovernmental organisations. Together, they aim to deliver 51 commitments that cut red tape and ensure more aid reaches those who need it most.

While the Grand Bargain has evolved, localisation remains at its core. In 2021, Grand Bargain 2.0 introduced two main priorities: 'quality funding' and 'localisation.' To achieve these, flexible groups called caucuses were created to tackle political obstacles, and National Reference Groups (NRGs) were set up to connect global commitments to local action.

Grand Bargain 3.0 aims to direct at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national actors, as directly as possible. The caucus on funding for localisation has made progress by developing roadmaps to reach this target and encouraging new policies that boost local participation and leadership.

The Grand Bargain 3.0 also focuses on anticipatory action, innovative financing, and using technology to better predict and respond to future crises. It is committed to making aid more inclusive and fair by focusing on gender and risk-sharing across all its efforts.

As global humanitarian needs grow, the Grand Bargain 3.0 is not just about meeting these needs; it is about driving sustainable and transformative change in the sector. Discussions are underway to extend its timeline to 2030, aligning it with the Sustainable Development Goals. The Grand Bargain remains vital for collaboration among all stakeholders to tackle the world's biggest humanitarian challenges.





Jean Claude Cerin

Executive Director, Fondasyon Chanje Lavi, Haiti
Acute Crisis Joint Response



Enel Angervil

Director, FOKA, Haiti
Acute Crisis Joint Response



Chrislene Hector

Presidente, LAPDEFF, Haiti
Acute Crisis Joint Response



Chantale Valcourt

General Coordinator, CAPAC Haiti
Acute Crisis Joint Response



Advancing locally led aid in Haiti: Voices from the ground

In Haiti, the effectiveness and sustainability of locally led aid hinge on deep involvement of local partners at every stage of the process. Jean Claude Cerin emphasises that from project inception to evaluation, local partners must be integral to the development process. This approach ensures that they fully understand the initiatives, can provide culturally relevant feedback, and take true ownership. Moreover, involving local authorities is crucial to align humanitarian actions with the community's vision.

Jean Claude's main recommendation is for international organisations to genuinely believe in and commit to locally led aid, rather than merely using it as a buzzword to attract donors. True locally led aid involves best practices and real involvement, not just superficial engagement.

For Enel Angervil, locally led aid in Haiti should empower people to rebuild their lives after disasters. He notes that most aid is currently directed and controlled by donors, leaving little room for local decision-making. To be effective and sustainable, aid should allow participants to make their own choices and focus on building resilience. Enel advocates for financial aid over material donations, promoting local resources, and providing practical training that empowers people spiritually, physically, economically, and mentally. He stresses that aid should support agricultural development, small trade, and local product processing to build community resilience.

Chrislene Hector (from LAPDEFF) highlights the importance of community participation in all stages of project implementation. Her organisation prioritises involving local authorities and participants to accurately identify needs and deliver effective responses. Capacity building and cultural adaptation are also key components of their approach, ensuring that aid is both relevant and respectful of local contexts. Chrislene's recommendation is for flexible and predictable funding. This allows local partners to plan long-term and respond swiftly to changing needs. Community consultation is essential to ensure that aid interventions are aligned with real needs.

Chantale Valcourt adds that local organisations and state institutions must improve their planning and coordination to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of aid. She advocates for a proactive approach that focuses on growth rather than mere survival. This allows organisations to concentrate on their mission rather than short-term funding concerns. Donors should support this by providing stable, long-term funding frameworks that enable local organisations to deliver reliable services directly to those most in need. Harmonising the actions of all stakeholders—donors, implementers, and coordinators—is also crucial for effective and sustainable aid delivery.

Together, these voices from Haiti underline the importance of genuine local involvement, trust-building, and structural support in making locally led aid both effective and sustainable. By respecting local knowledge, empowering communities, and providing the necessary resources and flexibility, we can ensure that aid efforts truly benefit those they are intended to help.

PROGRESS TO DATE: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE DUTCH RELIEF ALLIANCE



The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) is making strong progress on its Grand Bargain 3.0 commitments. The goal is simple: to make humanitarian responses more efficient, effective, and fair. DRA's journey from Geneva to Goma shows its dedication to locally led aid, better coordination, and greater impact. Below is a summary of the key achievements and how DRA plans to address future challenges, as outlined in its 2022-2026 strategy on four strategic objectives.

1. Impact for people in need

DRA focuses on quick, high-quality responses centred on people's needs. In 2023, it launched 17 Joint Responses (9 Protracted and 8 Acute) in 12 countries, reaching over 3.3 million people with life-saving aid. DRA also works to reduce the impact of future disasters. In Somalia and Sudan, farmers are growing more resilient crops. In Congo, former child soldiers are reintegrated into their communities. In Sudan, improved property rights aim to prevent land conflicts. These efforts help keep families safe and prevent new crises.

2. Equitable, effective, and efficient Joint Responses

DRA is committed to locally led action and strong partnerships. In 2023, local partners managed 37.1% of the response budget, exceeding the 35% target set for 2026. This approach ensures that local communities, who are often the first to respond to disasters, play a key role in decision-making. By working closely with country-based organisations and governments, DRA helps them prepare for future threats and respond more effectively. The DRA also piloted a risk sharing dialogue in three Protracted Crisis Joint Responses, to strengthen joint responsibility and enhance the effectiveness of support delivery to affected people.

Achievements in local partner funding in 2022 & 2023 Acute Crisis Joint Responses

Locally led action remains a strategic priority for DRA, reflected in its commitment to empower local and national actors in humanitarian responses. This commitment was evident in the 2022 Acute Crisis Joint Responses (ACJRs), where, on average, 50% of the total budget was allocated to DRA local partners. These allocations highlight DRA's dedication to supporting local capacity and leadership in crisis settings.

In 2023, most ACJRs continued this commitment, with funding allocations to local partners ranging from 36% in Sudan to 54% in Gaza. However, the Libya ACJR presented a unique challenge, where local partners received only 17.77% of the funding, falling below the Grand Bargain minimum of 25%. This was due to the limited presence and capacity of local organisations in Libya, combined with the complex security and political environment - making direct local engagement particularly challenging. Despite these obstacles, DRA remains committed to refining its approach to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of locally led humanitarian action in future responses.

Two key groups within DRA drive these localisation efforts: the **Local Advisory Group (LAG)**, which provides strategic guidance on localisation policies and advocates for systemic changes to enhance local leadership, and the **Localisation Working Group (LocWG)**, which focuses on the practical implementation of these strategies, developing tools and providing best practices for engaging local partners effectively. Together, these groups ensure that localisation is a core principle in DRA activities.



3. Quality, learning, and innovation

DRA continues to drive innovation and learning in its operations. Projects like a cash transfer platform in Ethiopia, 'one-stop-shop' youth centres in Syria, and hydroponic fodder production (a method of growing animal feed without soil and very little water) in Somalia showcase its innovative approach. These efforts aim to boost efficiency, promote sustainable impact, and find new ways to manage crises. DRA sees innovation as a tool for change, constantly looking for better methods to address future risks.¹

4. Visibility and influence

DRA uses its experience to advocate for change and diversify funding. It engages in forums like the European Humanitarian Forum and high-level meetings with policymakers to champion quality funding and locally led action. This positions DRA as a leader in the humanitarian sector, driving change for a more effective and just response system.

Challenges

While DRA has made significant progress, it faces several challenges:

- Funding and resources: The demand for aid is rising, but donor support is shrinking. This creates pressure on funding and resources.
- Flexibility and adaptability: Unforeseen crises in 2023 required DRA to quickly shift resources and adjust strategies to meet new needs.
- Equitable partnerships: Despite strides toward equal partnerships, achieving full local leadership and overcoming systemic biases remains challenging.



Conclusion

DRA's efforts under the Grand Bargain 3.0 show a clear commitment to transforming humanitarian action from Geneva to Goma. Despite the challenges, DRA continues to innovate, learn, and adapt, proving its role as a leader in delivering fair, effective, and impactful aid. Progress is evident: famines are decreasing, life expectancy is rising, and the number of victims from disasters is dropping. Emergency aid, rebuilding, and prevention have all played a part in these improvements, saving lives and offering millions a safer future. Moving forward, DRA will focus on building stronger local partnerships, enhancing quality and innovation, and pushing for systemic change in the humanitarian sector. The alliance is dedicated to ensuring aid reaches those in need and helps build a more peaceful, stable world.

1. Five of the Alliance's 2023 innovation projects, are explored in the Annual Impact Report 2023, section 6.4: dutchrelief.org/report2023

SYRIA: WHEN THE EARTH TREMBLES AND LIVES FALL APART

A timeline on the Acute Crisis Response after the earthquake



The earthquake, which hit parts of Türkiye and North-West Syria on 6 February 2023, severely damaged buildings, infrastructure, and caused the loss of lives, injuries and homelessness at a large scale. In Syria, the earthquake increased the already existing widespread need for humanitarian assistance as a result of conflict, economic hardship, a cholera outbreak and harsh winter weather. Eight million people were directly impacted by the earthquakes. More than 5,550 lives were lost and almost 12,000 were injured. Six Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) members collaborated with eight local partners to address some of the most urgent needs through a multi-sectoral approach. The Joint Response lasted for 6 months.

Syrians **Sara Savva** and **Basheer Srour** reflect on the events post-earthquake

Sara Savva, previous member of the Local Advisory Group (LAG) and the Deputy-General Director of GOPA-DERD, the largest faith-based organisation in Syria and a partner of ZOA. The organisation was responsible for the implementation of food distributions (ready to eat and regular food parcels), family hygiene kits, water bottles and the rehabilitation of a bakery in Latakia.

Basheer Srour, current member of the Local Advisory Group (LAG) and M&E officer at MSJM, a faith-based organisation working in health service delivery and partner of DORCAS.

“We were able to respond quickly because we already had some presence on the ground.”

**Monday morning
6 February 2023**

At 4:17 a.m., when most people were asleep, the ground in South East Türkiye and North West Syria trembled violently, sending thousands rushing from their homes. Within minutes, buildings collapsed, roads split, and cries were heard of those trapped beneath the rubble. Several hours after this 7.8 magnitude earthquake another 7.5 magnitude quake hit nearby. For the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) and their partners in Syria, a race against the clock had begun.

Basheer Srour:

I can't forget this day. Even in Damascus we felt the tremors. Just a very little shock here, but enough to spread fear. News started coming in, through television and social media. Hundreds of thousands of people were affected. Houses destroyed, families torn apart, and roads and buildings collapsed. We jumped into action. Our organisation called for an urgent meeting to plan how we could respond quickly. We had no time to waste. We needed to know what the size of the damage was, the number of families displaced, the count of the injured and dead. Every minute mattered.

Sara Savva:

Our Director General didn't hesitate. A decree went out to all our offices across Syria: respond immediately, use your own budget. We didn't wait. We spent our own money. Our team was already in the field during the first hours of the earthquake. We got in touch with our partners, including DRA. Daily ZOOM-meetings followed, with constant coordination, challenges and decisions.

**The first crucial
72 hours**

People needed medical attention quickly. They were crushed under collapsed buildings in freezing temperatures. Those who managed to survive the cold and their injuries needed food and water urgently. Relentless aftershocks made assistance very difficult. It was raining and snowing. After three days, the chances of pulling people from under the rubble alive were very small.

Basheer Srour:

The next day, we immediately started to save lives. We quickly moved our mobile medical clinics to the areas where people were affected. And one by one we started pulling people from under the rubble and brought the wounded to our clinics in Hama and Idlib. First, we coordinated with the government and other organisations.

After two days we already started activities with our DRA partner. We were able to respond quickly because we already had some presence on the ground. As local organisations, we know the communities, we have strong relations with the government, and we can reach the affected areas quickly.

It was so important that we were not duplicating activities or leaving other areas without help. The international and local NGOs in the DRA Joint Response really coordinated to ensure that there was no overlap.

Sara Savva:

In the first few days, we wanted to get a good overview of what was needed. I saw what happens if a response is not based on information from the ground. For example, in Aleppo. INGOs were pouring lots of aid into a place that didn't need this specific kind of aid. They would overload one shelter with ready-to-eat-meals until the people themselves said: please do not give us more food items, we don't need this much. There

were so many meals that were being thrown away at the end of the day. And in another area people received food baskets with ingredients in sachets and a bottle of oil, a rice bag, some butter, etc. These people were living under bridges, in the parks of local communities, or in shelters. They didn't have the kitchen and utensils to prepare this food.

Our organisation was gathering information in Aleppo, Latakia and Hama, the earthquake affected cities. We checked how many people were in the shelters, how many shelters were opening up, how many people were in the hospitals, and the kind of needs that they had. We went everywhere in those first days. We needed to witness the situation first hand to be able to make plans.

We were immediately emailing those needs to our partners, including DRA partners. They were very flexible and very supportive. We had to rely on our own data because the numbers from other humanitarian actors didn't match. Some INGOs even told us that our data was the only information they had in those first days. The DRA response was definitely locally led.

February 10th Four days after the earthquake, the official DRA Acute Crisis Joint Response started. The acute response was made easier because DRA's humanitarian partners were already present in Syria.

Sara Savva:

When the first instalments from our donors were sent, we experienced issues with the Syrian wire transfers due to the international sanctions against the Syrian regime. Banks were rejecting the payments for about a month and a half. This was difficult for us. We bridged the gaps using our own funds. This meant that we couldn't help as many people as we had hoped, but we managed to reach at least those in severe need. The crisis modifier (a percentage of the budget to be used for quick responses to unforeseen emergencies, ed.) is one of the wonderful localisation milestones from DRA which would have been helpful then, but this was effected from 2024 onwards. It would be great if all the INGOs in Syria would work this way. Especially in a context like Syria, where the inflation is increasing all the time, causing a strong depreciation of the local currency. What we budget at the beginning of the year does not have the same purchase value when it's being implemented after six months.

The first months after the earthquake Before the earthquake, DRA partners were moving away from relief aid and started focusing on the development stage. The earthquake has wiped all this away. Organisations had to go back to zero, providing basic things like food, shelter and water.

Sara Savva:

You know, after the disaster of the earthquake, we said to all our partners that it's only the beginning. People's needs will change over time. From lifesaving aid to early recovery and then sustainable development. We implemented the response in two phases, from emergency towards a more, let's say, resilient approach. For example, we provided psychological first aid to overcome the trauma of losing everything in the earthquake. And some people lost their shops and their source of income. So we supported families with starting up their business again. Such a simple thing as restarting a bakery has a huge impact. Bread is such an essential source of food security for millions of people across the country. The DRA partners were very supportive during this transition.



A year and a half later Looking back in 2024.

Basheer Srour:

In general, the Dutch Relief Alliance was so agile and flexible to respond to this disaster and to respond to our requests, it's very good!

Of course, there is always room for improvement. Frankly, when we face an urgent disaster like this, we need every moment we have to rescue victims who are under the rubble. I think we need a new mechanism to enable decision-making by local organisations immediately, in coordination with international organisations and DRA of course. It would be good to pre-assign people to an operation room and establish hot lines to coordinate immediately with all international and national aid agencies.

Sara Savva:

It's the Dutch experience in localisation that has made a difference in Syria. For most organisations the idea of localisation is still at the beginner's level. But with the Dutch experience under DRA, we have realised milestones. It has been a journey, I would say, and so far, the results have been really incredible. The funding for indirect costs, the capacity strengthening component, the crisis modifier, the security line in the budget, those are essential in our context. Now that they're there, I think we're in good hands regarding our ability to respond quickly to the needs. We have to be empowered and supported in order for us to help others. Important, once the funding will maybe decrease or even stop in the future. This is localisation for us.

“For most organisations the idea of localisation is still at the beginner's level. But with the Dutch experience under DRA, we have realised milestones”



**Anton van Wijk,
Crisis Coordinator of the Dutch Relief Alliance since September 2023, based in the Netherlands**

We heard very quickly that something serious had happened. It was all over the news. In the case of an acute, 'rapid-onset' emergency like this earthquake, everyone from DRA jumps into action mode. In case of an acute crisis, a couple of DRA partners first write a recommendation paper on what happened, on which sectors the response should focus, and which partners are present in which locations. If two thirds of all DRA partners agree that a response is needed, the clock starts ticking for the Response Task Force.

Within 72 hours, there has to be a proposal with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and contracts have to be signed with the Dutch DRA partners that will respond. Each will also propose the local partners they will work with. The amount of consultations with the local partners will differ per DRA partner. The last part of the subcontracting, to local partners, extends beyond 72 hours. However, DRA and local partners are generally responding with their own funding in the meantime. Immediately after the earthquake, funding from the protracted crisis joint response was shifted to local partners to respond, similar to the crisis modifier.

In protracted crises DRA has set a minimum of 35% to be allocated to local partners. For acute crises there is no formal minimum, but the aim is similar. In this case in Syria, about 45% of the budget was implemented through local partners.

I think as an alliance, DRA has an added value for local organisations on a number of things, including the quality of funding: it is multi-year, unearmarked and flexible. Local organisations are equal partners in shaping the joint responses. The idea is that frontline responders should keep as much quality in the funding as possible.

I can see that DRA partners are also implementing it outside of the DRA. It really has a snowball effect.



**Amjad Elsheik Elbshir
Haroun**

Locally led responses amidst a humanitarian catastrophe
#KEEPEYESONSUDAN

In the lobby of a colourful, trendy hotel in The Hague, Amjad Elsheik Elbshir Haroun shares his views on locally led humanitarian action in Sudan. He is in the Netherlands for a 'Learning Week' organised by the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA). Along with other delegates from around the world, he has just come from a session at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is still full of energy from what was discussed. "They were so interested in hearing what we had to say!" As he sits down among the digital nomads enjoying their cappuccino behind their laptops, the contrast of this setting with what is happening in his home country couldn't be bigger.

#KeepEyesOnSudan

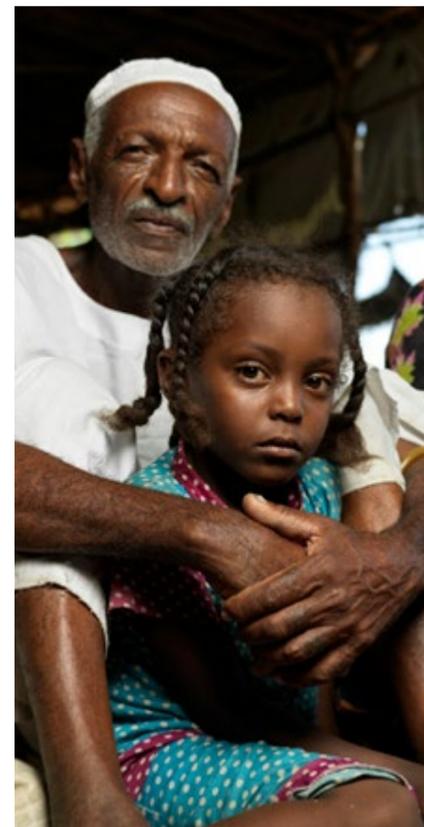
With the hashtag #KeepEyesOnSudan, DRA asks not to forget about the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding in Sudan. The sudden outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023 has proven to be disastrous in a country already facing a major humanitarian crisis. Over 24 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance, both in areas facing humanitarian crises for many years and in areas that until recently were less affected. Millions of people have been forced to leave their homes, with many more facing hunger and the threat of disease. A year after the recent outburst of violence, Reuters reports that people in some parts of Sudan are so desperately hungry that they eat soil and leaves. Violence, including sexual violence, is rampant. Access to humanitarian assistance for people in need is extremely difficult. And yet, the situation in Sudan is drawing little global attention.

DRA has been in Sudan with relief and resilience interventions since 2019. In the 2022-2023 Sudan Joint Response, international, national and local partners have worked together in project areas in the states North Darfur, East Darfur, South Kordofan, North Kordofan, Khartoum, Gaderef and White Nile. Their activities focused on three main objectives: to protect people affected by conflict and disaster against violence, neglect and exploitation, to help local communities stabilise and become more resilient by providing resources required to protect and rebuild livelihood assets, and to combat gender-based violence by contributing to child protection and gender-equitable healthcare.

It is impressive to see Amjad remaining remarkably good-natured. He comes across as someone that sees light even in the darkest of times. With energy and a sense of humour, he explains point by point how DRA is working on locally led responses and what have been some of the challenges. You can tell that he has recently been involved in writing a localisation action plan as an exit strategy for the DRA. Central to the effectiveness of this plan: capacity strengthening, and more specifically: learning by doing.

Locally led without realising it

When asked how DRA is doing in implementing the Grand Bargain Commitments, Amjad says: "DRA has basically been doing localisation since a long time ago. We as local actors were involved in participatory design





workshops with other actors and government. It was localisation, but without realising it.” He explains that before, the decisions for joint response planning came from the Dutch DRA partners. Now, it comes from national and local-level actors. *“The ideas are 100% local partners and the JR coordinators guide us. That’s localisation.”*

Just like an ambulance

Safety and security are among the key reasons why strengthening locally led responses is so important in Sudan. Amjad: *“We work in Darfur, Khartoum, and other areas. These are basically 100% inaccessible for humanitarian actors. In these places, the most vulnerable people exist. So, we need to capacitate host communities to be able to respond to the needs with their own available resources.”* He refers to the need to shift resources and money to local actors. For this reason, Amjad is very happy with the so-called ‘crisis modifier’ in the DRA budget, previously called ‘contingency fund’. This part of the budget - 5% in Sudan - is reserved for an unforeseen crisis. Any partner, whether local or INGO, can apply to respond. Amjad stresses: *“It is meant to intervene swiftly. It’s just like an ambulance: it has to be there fast, otherwise you’ll lose lives.”*

At the same time, Amjad recognises a need for more practical guidance for local communities: *“They need to know what to do and how to do it. Some local actors at the grassroots of where the crisis is taking place are not officially registered. They need to have a minimum knowledge of financing and reporting to be able to get funded.”*

A ripple effect

Despite a number of challenges, Amjad shares some positive examples of how strengthening capacities can have a ripple effect. *“We held training sessions in a community to stop free open defecation. The next day, the community members had advocated for a cleaning campaign to the government by themselves. They asked to give them more tools, vehicles, and more staff to help them with the campaign. Without us provoking them. They took action by themselves. We only trained them on the theory.”*

Another example he shares is about community animal health workers who are able to respond to outbreaks of diseases and provide early treatment. These health workers work with nomads who move their livestock between areas with water and grass from southern Sudan to South Sudan - places where the government and aid organisations have less presence. Amjad: *“In southern Sudan, roads are inaccessible. Some 50 km takes you a whole day struggling with a 4x4 and tractor.”* When pastoralists move between countries, animals get infected and spread it around. With basic and refresher training, the community health workers now have the tools, equipment, knowledge and access to respond. They can control outbreaks until assistance arrives from the government and organisations.

Amjad sees in these examples how emergency responses are increasingly taken up by local actors, as a result of DRA’s localisation efforts. At the same time, it underlines the necessity of locally led action. Without context-specific knowledge and ‘presence on the ground’, allowing for quick and effective responses, a crisis can exacerbate quickly.

“In a country like Sudan, sharing resources such as landline communication is very important for local organisations. Because it doesn’t always work or is too expensive for us.”

Sending an email without internet

Amjad jumps up when asked what is needed to further enhance locally led responses in Sudan. *“Good question!”* He sums up a number of issues. *“Firstly, we need more active members on the localisation working group in Sudan. The more members there are, the more effectively the job can be accelerated.”* He continues to say that some international NGOs have not been very actively involved, despite their initial interest. *“I’m not sure why. If they are really interested, they have to be active in the group. Otherwise, they should give up their seat to someone else who is more willing to participate in localisation”.*

According to Amjad, there is great variety among international partners, including within DRA, when it comes to moving this agenda further. He talks about resource sharing such as providing their office as a meeting place or sharing internet connection, as a crucial aspect that INGOs can help local organisations with. A suggestion he makes is for the lead organisation in the DRA joint response to install a satellite phone to ensure communication is possible when the internet is shut down or the signal is weak.

He shares an example of how this is impacting his daily work. *“In a country like Sudan, sharing resources such as landline communication is very important for local organisations. Because it doesn’t always work or is too expensive for us. Some UN agencies are sophisticated and have good infrastructure such as satellite phones. But when the network is down and I go to their premises and ask: Could you please give me an hour to do what I need to do? I then get told that I need to make a request, to write an email, the request has to come from the director...etc. And I say: Guys, how can I write an email if there is no internet?!”* He laughs ironically. *“So instead of helping, they are putting more obstacles in my way. I have to wait for a response. And I just think: Please HELP me!”*

“The crisis modifier is meant to intervene swiftly. It’s just like an ambulance: it has to be there fast, otherwise you’ll lose lives.”



Amjad concludes with a serious plea for help. *“At least, if we have to follow this process, make it quicker and more flexible. Sometimes we wait for a week. And people die. You don’t know what can happen in a week. So, if INGOs can help with resources, this can really support localisation and humanitarian action.”*

Amjad rushes to his next meeting. He is on a mission: Keep eyes on Sudan.

Amjad Elsheik Elbshir Haroun is Programme Manager at Vet-Care organisation (VCO). He is the co-lead in the Localisation Working Group (not related to DRA) and works closely with DRA’s Local Advisory Group on the Sudan Joint Response.



The Grand Bargain Commitments in Ethiopia

IT'S ALL ABOUT TRUST AND EQUAL PARTNERSHIPS

“Hi! Is the connection working now?” The interview takes place online. Ayenew Bekele is behind his desk in his office in Addis Ababa; Workayehu Bizu is on a project visit and has found a place under a tree next to a brick wall. During the interview, heavy rains start to fall and Workayehu runs to find a dry spot for his laptop. Soon, all digital and weather-related hindrances move to the background when both men share their insights about the Grand Bargain Commitments. Workayehu in his position as Director of local NGO ANPPCAN and as member of the Local Advisory Group (LAG) and the Response Task Force (RTF). Ayenew as Country Coordinator for the joint response in Ethiopia.

Ayenew kicks off by explaining that the joint response in Ethiopia focuses on two regions, in areas that could be considered as ‘forgotten’ or ‘overlooked’. There are twelve partners in the response, of which seven are ‘local’ organisations. Together, these organisations provide a multi-sectoral and complementary response to people in need.

How is the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) doing when it comes to implementing the Grand Bargain Commitments in Ethiopia?

Both men are unified in their response. According to them, DRA is quite unique in their approach, particularly compared to other donors in the humanitarian sector. Workayehu: *“We work with different donors. And we can clearly see that DRA is different.”* The flexibility of funding is the first key issue the men bring up. Whereas in the humanitarian sector most grants are short-term, mostly between 3 to 6 months, the protracted crisis response in Ethiopia has funding for 2 to 3 years. Workayehu: *“This multi-year funding is a great opportunity to invest in the communities that we represent on the ground. This way we can really support them to make them more resilient before, during and after crises.”*

The flexibility of funding closely ties in with the localisation agenda. In the Ethiopia joint response, almost half of the budget (45%) goes to local actors - much more than the minimum of 35%. On top of that, local actors receive 5% of the budget for capacity strengthening. The so-called ‘crisis modifier’, the budget line that allows for responding to emerging crises, is another positive development the men praise.

The men explain how important it is for local actors to be taken seriously in the humanitarian sector. *“We are usually not involved in decision-making, and our voices are not heard”,* says Workayehu. *“Our views, our concerns, our perceptions, are not always taken into account. We are usually just recipients. This is really a challenge. But in the case of DRA, we are equal partners working for the same goal: to improve the lives of affected communities.”*

Ayenew fully agrees. He adds that DRA is pushing to have local actors meaningfully involved from the very beginning. *“They really want local actors to come to the frontline”.* The Local Advisory Group (LAG), is one of those spaces which DRA created where local actors have a voice.

“If we make our programmes locally led, we can still provide meaningful support to the needy communities with the existing limited resources.”

Please explain again, why is it so important that the humanitarian response is locally led?

Ayenew and Workayehu patiently answer this question that should already be quite obvious. A couple of things are important, they say. First and foremost: the timeliness of the response. *“As you know, local partners and community-based organisations are working on the ground, at the grassroots level. So, if a programme is locally led, it is possible to provide timely responses to the affected community.”* Workayehu adds that this is particularly important when access is difficult, for example in conflict-prone areas. Local partners, with a long-term presence in the area, often have a longstanding relationship with local authorities, which allows them to reach out to people in need - in many cases better than international organisations that are based in the country offices.

The second point that Workayehu shares is that a locally led response to a crisis is more cost-effective and sustainable than an international one. *“Especially at the moment, with resources shrinking because of various crises happening all over the world. If we make our programmes locally led, we can still provide meaningful support to the needy communities with the existing limited resources.”* The quality funding (see textbox) that DRA provides really helps, Ayenew adds.

“And this is why we need to invest not only in training, but also in institutional system development, like HR, financial systems, and policy and strategy development. So local partners can really run their programmes independently”, says Ayenew. *“From what I observe, we cannot build localisation by just providing training.”*

Quality funding

The drive towards more localised humanitarian responses is hugely enhanced by the more predictable, multi-year and flexible ‘quality funding’ opportunity that the DRA mechanism can offer. Or, as formulated in the Grand Bargain Commitments (GB2.0): ‘Quality funding is as flexible, predictable and timely as possible throughout the delivery chain – including for local responders – while still being clear and transparent (to an appropriate level of detail) in how it is used and where it goes and what it achieves’.

From: DRA Strategy 2021-2026



Moving from principle to practice

According to both, DRA has made a good start to implement the Grand Bargain Commitments, and to bring local actors to the frontline in Ethiopia. But they are also frank: progress varies from partner to partner. They mention a gap between the localisation principles and commitments made at the level of the Dutch partners in the Netherlands, and the implementation by individual INGOs at the country-level.

Both men see persistent power imbalances between international and 'local' partners. The men talk about a 'donor is the boss' mentality among some organisations. *"Some international partners provide the majority of their funds to local actors, but some allocate the absolute minimum. We see that there is a need to trust local actors and provide more roles for them. That should be the intention of a truly equitable partnership."*

Aynew stresses: *"Local partners are organisations with huge experience, who know the culture, the values of the community at the ground. They have a good relationship with government and other stakeholders, which is very critical to implement our programmes smoothly and bring about the required change on the ground"*.

How to best save most lives, this is what it's all about.

The conclusion is clear: There is good progress being made by DRA in implementing the Grand Bargain Commitments in Ethiopia. And now it's time for others to do the same. *"I think DRA is in a good position to push others to follow in its footsteps,"* Workayehu concludes.



In Ethiopia's protracted crisis response, the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) responds to the needs of IDPs and host communities affected by conflict, prolonged drought and other recurring emergencies. The situation in some parts of the country is very unstable and unpredictable. A lot of basic services were destroyed, such as health and WASH facilities and the influx of internally displaced people is getting out of control. These zones are also experiencing the impact of natural shocks and intercommunal conflict. Furthermore, the drought in Oromia is causing problems of food insecurity, famine and climate refugees. There is an urgent need for food and nutrition support, WASH support, cash assistance, health and education facilities.

The aid organisations of the Dutch Relief Alliance and their local partners are working together to deliver life-saving aid and essential services. The organisations each bring their own expertise to the table.

SHIFTING MINDSETS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has long been a site of complex humanitarian crises, exacerbated by ongoing conflicts and displacement. The Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), through its Protracted Crisis Joint Response in the DRC, has sought to address these crises by emphasising locally led initiatives. Through the eyes of Paulin Bisha Kabaya, Deputy Country Coordinator at CODEVAH (a local NGO), and Stephania Noel, Joint Response Country Coordinator (World Vision DRC), we explore the challenges and successes of locally led aid in this Joint Response. Including one of the most pressing challenges: the need to shift mindsets.

The DRC's protracted crisis is characterised by widespread displacement driven by violent conflicts between armed groups. Paulin speaks to me from his car, bouncing along a rough road with a spotty connection, a testament to the very challenges he describes. *"The main challenge the communities are facing here is displacement, mainly due to the violent conflicts between ethnic groups, which*

leads to massive population movements," he explains as the signal crackles in and out. At one point, he has to stop his car, parking beside the road to get a better connection. His energetic smile is contagious as he shows me the lush landscape outside his window, even jokingly suggesting I visit the DRC to see the gorillas. *"It's cheaper here than in Rwanda."* His enthusiasm for his country is evident.

These displacements create immense logistical challenges for aid delivery, with poor road conditions and security concerns further complicating access to affected areas. *"The roads are really in bad condition,"* Paulin adds, seriously this time, emphasising how this can disrupt the timely delivery of aid.

The role of the Grand Bargain Commitments

The Grand Bargain commitments, especially those focused on localisation, have shaped the Joint Response in the DRC. Both Paulin and Stephania emphasise the progress toward locally led aid. They note that a minimum of 35% of funding now goes to local partners, surpassing the original target of 25% set by the Grand Bargain Commitments, and enabling local organisations to better meet their communities' needs.

Paulin appreciates the DRA's focus on capacity strengthening. *"Every year, we receive funds specifically for capacity, and this year, 5% of our budget is dedicated to that. The best part is that we decide how to use it,"* he said. Additionally, the DRA's decision to allocate 6% of the budget for indirect cost recovery (ICR) has been crucial in helping local organisations make their operations sustainable.



However, Paulin expresses his frustration with contractual delays and the lack of multi-annual contracts for local partners. *“We only have one-year contracts, and even getting those can be delayed,”* he says. These delays create financial instability and hinder timely project implementation. *“Some activities meant to start in January were delayed until June, which really impacts our ability to respond effectively.”* Additionally, Paulin sees a need for consistency in funding allocations across different contexts. *“In the DRC, we give more than 35% of the budget to local partners, but in other places, like Afghanistan, it’s as high as 90%. It would be better to harmonise these partnership principles,”* he suggested, advocating for a unified approach among all DRA partners.

Sitting behind her desk, in front of a bright turquoise wall that complements her black dotted white shirt, Stephania highlights the importance of a *“100% collaboration and complementarity approach.”* This approach is designed to ensure that the same participants receive support across multiple programme components, rather than duplicating efforts. This unique approach ensures that INGOs and local partners work together in specific locations to avoid overlap and maximise impact.

Locally led aid in action

The Joint Response in the DRC stands out as a strong example of locally led aid. Local organisations like CODEVAH are deeply embedded and have a nuanced understanding of the local context that international organisations often lack. Paulin, also representing the Local Advisory Group, expresses pride in the progress made: *“Our involvement in strategic decisions has increased our influence over where and how aid is delivered.”* He described their hands-on approach: *“As we are local, we are based inside the communities. We conduct need assessments together, ensuring that our work is rooted in the actual needs of the communities. We know what is truly necessary.”*

Stephania shares her satisfaction with the progress of local partners. *“There’s been a big change from when we started to where we are today,”* she reflects. *“Some partners have really improved their governance, financial, and HR systems. Two even developed their own safeguarding policies.”* This transformation has allowed local partners like FEPSI, which has been with World Vision since 2016, to take on more significant responsibilities, particularly in protection and health. Meanwhile, others, like CODEVAH, have grown into key players managing multiple projects effectively. *“When we started, the capacity was very low. But now, they’re scoring themselves three, even four out of five, which is very good.”* In contrast, some partners with less experience focus on tasks like sensitisation in the WASH sector and are still developing their capacity for more complex roles.

Local organisations have better access to and relationships with local authorities. This is essential in regions where government approval is needed for aid operations. *“Our local presence helps us gain the trust of local leaders,”* Stephania says. Paulin echoes this, noting that local partners’ involvement often leads to greater acceptance of international partners within communities. *“Being with us gives our international partners more access and acceptance, especially in complicated areas like Fizi.”*

Local leadership also enhances the sustainability of interventions, as local organisations remain engaged long after international actors have left. *“When we [as INGOs, ed.] leave, they stay,”* Stephania notes.



Navigating locally led aid

Both Paulin and Stephania agree that while progress has been made, there is still a long way to go. Paulin candidly discusses the challenges of being deeply embedded in the community. *“When allocating funds locally, we sometimes need to push local leaders to provide the necessary documents. These leaders may not be fully aware of humanitarian principles or financial issues, which can lead to delays.”* Despite this, Paulin emphasises the importance of maintaining strong partnerships and ensuring accountability. *“We provide funds, but getting invoices or reports back can be delayed. By staying in touch and working together, we sort it out.”*

Navigating local power dynamics adds another layer of complexity. *“Sometimes local leaders, like a village chief, will ask us to add their wife or another person to the list of beneficiaries for the distribution of cash, food, or seeds,”* Paulin explains. *“We then have to negotiate and remind them of the need to focus on the most vulnerable. It’s not always easy, but through better communication, they understand, we build trust, and we can continue our work.”*

Stephania also points out the challenge of retaining qualified staff within local organisations. The salary gap between INGOs and local NGOs often leads to high staff turnover, weakening local partners over time. *“Once staff gain experience, they often leave for better-paying jobs with INGOs,”* she explains, underscoring the ongoing struggle to maintain a stable workforce.

Shifting mindsets

One of the biggest challenges in advancing locally led responses in the DRC, according to Stephania, isn’t just logistical or financial—it’s a matter of mindset. The issue isn’t just with international organisations; local actors also need to embrace their role. *“Some people still think locally led just means partnering with local organisations without really trusting them to lead.”* However, she

“As we are local, we are based inside the communities. We conduct need assessments together, ensuring that our work is rooted in the actual needs of the communities. We know what is truly necessary.”

“Some people still think locally led just means partnering with local organisations without really trusting them to lead.”

RESILIENCE IN ACTION: LOCALLY LED AID IN AFGHANISTAN



Sayed Qais Hussaini



Shahabuddin Hamdard

Riaz Wali
(no picture)

Afghanistan remains one of the toughest places for delivering humanitarian aid, especially since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. In this context, the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) has found a way forward by partnering with local organisations through its Joint Response initiative. By tapping into the strength of local knowledge and expertise, they manage to navigate Afghan's complex humanitarian landscape. Central to these efforts are the local partners. Drawing on insights from three key local stakeholders, Shahabuddin Hamdard, Riaz Wali, and Sayed Qais Hussaini, we discuss their experiences and perspectives as they navigate through the difficult circumstances, determined that aid reaches those who need it most.

The complexity of Afghan's humanitarian crisis

"The crisis here never stops," says Shahabuddin Hamdard, the country director of the Organisation of Human Welfare (OHW). "We have never experienced a situation where one crisis ends before another begins." Hamdard paints a stark picture of a nation caught in a cycle of conflict, natural disasters, and ever-tightening restrictions on humanitarian work. These challenges have sparked a significant brain drain of skilled NGO staff, leaving local organisations with limited expertise. "Many of our best people have fled," he says, "and those of us who remain are constantly finding ways to do more with less."

Riaz Wali, director of the Rural Rehabilitation Association for Afghanistan (RRAA), echoes this sentiment. "The Taliban's restrictions, especially on women, have made our work even harder," he adds. "But unlike some international NGOs that have pulled out, we stay. We have to." Both Hamdard and Wali stress the resilience of local organisations, which remain on the ground, adapting and responding to the needs of their communities.

has seen a shift, with some partners now challenging the status quo and insisting on adherence to the Grand Bargain principles. "They're beginning to understand, but it's that mindset that needs to change—from both sides."

She leans forward slightly, her tone intensifying as she emphasises the urgency of this shift. "Sometimes even the local partners themselves don't fully understand what localisation means, and some DRA members don't either. It's not just about working with local partners; it's about truly integrating them into decision-making," she explained. "We need everyone to realise that local partners are not here to take jobs; they're here to help the community. Understanding what the Grand Bargain truly means, understanding what locally led truly means—that's the level we need to reach. But we still have a lot to do to get there."

Reflecting on her 14 years in the humanitarian sector, Stephania compares the current emphasis on localisation to the earlier global push for safeguarding. "Before, safeguarding wasn't a big thing, but now, it's everywhere. So why not have something similar for localisation?" She suggests a global campaign and regular refreshers on what the Grand Bargain and localisation mean, ensuring they are as widely recognised and enforced as safeguarding practices.

The Joint Response in the DRC represents an important step towards locally led aid. It shows the benefits of involving local organisations in every stage of the humanitarian response. However, as both Paulin and Stephania highlight, achieving true localisation requires addressing ongoing challenges, including contractual issues, capacity building, and greater financial autonomy for local partners. The experiences and insights of local actors like Paulin and Stephania will be crucial in guiding the way forward. And Stephania pointed out, for locally led aid to succeed, the first battle is in the minds of those who implement it.

And, as the DRA has shown, they've been serious about taking the Grand Bargain from Geneva to Goma—proving that localisation isn't just a buzzword but a genuine commitment to changing the way they work.

"Understanding what the Grand Bargain truly means, understanding what locally led truly means that's the level we need to reach. But we still have a lot to do to get there."

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO PROTRACTED CRISIS JOINT RESPONSE

Facts & figures

This Joint Response addresses the impacts of violent conflict, displacement, and epidemics by providing multi-sectoral assistance and sustainable solutions, driven by community-identified needs.

Goal:	Sustain lives of the most vulnerable in Eastern DRC.
Lead organisation:	World Vision
Partners:	CARE Nederland, Red een Kind, Tearfund, War Child, CODEVAH, Eglise du Christ au Congo – Nord Kivu, Help Channel Congo, CFAD, FEPSI, Union des Femmes pour la Paix, Kujitegemea Action
Duration:	January 1, 2022 – December 31, 2023
Location:	Five health zones in North & South Kivu, including Masisi, Musienene, Bunyakiri, Fizi, and Nundu.
Response Focus:	- Life-saving assistance: clean water, hygiene, food, education, and protection for women and children. - Resilience building: agricultural training, savings groups, school improvement plans, and reintegration of children recruited by armed groups.



Leveraging local knowledge

Local organisations are often the only actors with the access and trust required to deliver aid. *Local organisations are deeply embedded in their communities and better positioned to identify and respond to the most pressing needs,*” Hamdard says. This local knowledge and presence are vital, particularly in a crisis where external actors face huge access and security challenges.

Sayed Qais Hussaini, Deputy Executive Director of BARAN, offers a glimpse into how his organisation uses this knowledge to navigate Afghanistan’s complex landscape. *“We have a strong network within communities, including elders and religious leaders, who can influence local authorities,”* Hussaini shares. *“When faced with restrictions, we use these networks to find local solutions, like starting activities without waiting for formal approvals when delays could cost lives.”*

Creativity amidst challenges

Adapting to Afghanistan’s ever-changing environment demands creativity. Hussaini recounts how BARAN tackled resistance to vaccination in conservative areas like Kandahar, where there are strong cultural barriers: *“We formed ‘refusal committees’ of families who had initially rejected vaccines. Once they saw the benefits, these families became our champions, persuading others to get vaccinated too.”*

Meanwhile, the DRA’s Joint Response has embraced innovative approaches, such as installing solar-powered water schemes. *“Before these systems, many communities faced severe water shortages, forcing some families to consider leaving their homes,”* Wali notes. *“Now, they have a sustainable water source. Not just a temporary fix but a step towards long-term resilience.”*

The Grand Bargain: pushing for locally led aid

In 2016, major donors and humanitarian organisations agreed on the Grand Bargain to make aid more effective and efficient. A key focus was on localisation —shifting power and resources to local organisations. Despite the difficult circumstances, a standout achievement of DRA’s Joint Response is the high level of localisation. Hamdard, Wali, and Hussaini all commend DRA for ensuring that a substantial portion of the aid budget is allocated to local organisations in Afghanistan —up to 90% in some cases.

“But localisation should be about more than just funding,” Hussaini insists. *“It’s also about letting us design programmes that make sense on the ground. In our Joint Response, there are many positive points, but sometimes international partners still see local NGOs as just recipients of funds rather than equal partners in planning and implementation.”*

Hussaini also highlights the need for a stronger focus on women. *“With so many restrictions on women’s education and employment, the DRA could do more to create opportunities for them,”* he suggests. *“Volunteer programmes, for instance, could help recent graduates gain the experience they need to enter the workforce, despite the current restrictions.”*

“DRA allows local partners like us to plan and design projects based on the needs we identify in our communities”

The importance of flexibility

The flexibility to adapt quickly to local needs is a lifeline for Afghan organisations. *“Restrictions from authorities often complicate operations and delay projects, and limit the activities of local staff, especially women,”* Hamdard explains. Yet, local organisations have found ways to keep going. Hussaini shares that in their health facilities, *“we’ve made arrangements to ensure female staff can work within cultural norms, such as having a male relative accompany them.”*

Hamdard, Wali, and Hussaini all agree on the need for ongoing capacity strengthening and financial support. Wali notes, *“Continuous support is crucial for us to manage projects effectively.”* They also call for a stronger role for local organisations in decision-making processes. *“Local voices need to influence aid programmes at the highest levels of decision-making within international alliances like the DRA,”* Wali adds.

Enhancing locally led aid

For true localisation to take root, there needs to be a shared understanding of what it means. As Wali points out, the term *“localisation”* is interpreted differently by various stakeholders, leading to inconsistencies in its implementation. *Sometimes, it just means involving local organisations in meetings,*” Wali points out. *“For others, it means fully transferring the responsibility for aid delivery to local actors.”* Without a shared understanding of what localisation entails, it is difficult to measure progress and hold actors accountable.



“Not just a temporary fix but a step towards long-term resilience.”

“Without global support, our ability to operate safely is at risk.”

Hussaini adds, “DRA allows local partners like us to plan and design projects based on the needs we identify in our communities,” he says. “This flexibility is crucial. Unlike many donors who provide rigid frameworks, the DRA lets us adjust our activities to complement other ongoing efforts and address unmet needs.” However, he emphasises the need for international donors to mainstream localisation in their policies and allow for more direct funding to experienced local NGOs.

Towards a resilient future

The DRA’s Joint Response in Afghanistan is a step towards truly locally led humanitarian aid. Organisations like BARAN, OHW, and RRAA show that local actors are not only capable but also uniquely positioned to deliver aid effectively. However, for this model to succeed, international partners must commit to sustained support, mutual learning, and treating local organisations as equals.

“Without global support,” Hamdard warns, “our ability to operate safely is at risk.” The call is clear: The world must rally behind these local heroes to make sure they can continue their important work and build a more resilient future for Afghanistan.

Risk sharing pilot: no longer alone when facing risks

Working in humanitarian aid comes with a great number of risks. They run from security risks to financial risks and even risks to an organisation’s reputation. And the burden of dealing with these risks weighs heavily on the shoulders of local organisations in the delivery chain. DRA, together with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), initiated conversations to start sharing these risks more evenly among all partners in the aid delivery chain.

DRA organised workshops with the Joint Response programmes in DRC, Yemen and Ethiopia, where all partners engaged in risk sharing dialogue using the Global Risk Sharing Framework. Alycke de Haan-Slomp, Co-Chair of the Localisation Working Group: “We thought it was really important to enable local actors to speak freely about the risks they encounter in their specific contexts and how they mitigate them. Daring to speak out can be quite a challenge for some partners. In this pilot we really wanted to learn. We wanted to find possibilities to manage risks more evenly among all partners in the aid delivery chain. In the end, this is how we can provide the best aid possible.”

DRA and MFA have jointly written a Learning Paper to capture the lessons from the risk sharing pilots. Alycke explains that it was invaluable to have all the key players in the aid delivery chain together. “It was really special. For some local partners it was the first opportunity to interact with all actors, particularly donors, in the joint response. Some things were discussed for the first time.” One example she gives is the workload for aid workers. “We have to realise that after years of protracted crisis this can become quite heavy for local people. It is different for them than for international staff. By being in the same room we could have an open conversation on how partners are managing risks and seek solutions towards risk sharing.” The three pilot country programmes developed joint action plans with a wide range of risk sharing solutions. A local actor in the workshop mentioned that having a joint responsibility for risk management means that they no longer have to feel alone when facing risks in the field.

The pilot means a significant stride forward in addressing systemic barriers to equitable partnerships. Alycke stipulates that much remains to be done. “There are so many aspects of risk management to discuss. There are no easy solutions. You have to build trust over time. We’re now moving to the next phase where other country programmes also start this dialogue with all partners. Meanwhile, the pilot countries work on concrete action plans. The dialogue is ongoing.”

Locally led, how?

Implementing sustainable locally led aid in South Sudan



Sr. Gracy Adichirayil
Director, Mary Help college of
Nursing and Midwifery,
South Sudan, Protracted Crisis
Joint Response

Thank you for asking this important question. In our context, sustainability is rooted in community involvement. As a local faith-based NGO in South Sudan since 2000, we’ve established a Nursing and Midwifery College, a hospital, schools, and various development programmes. The community has given us land for these activities, so we don’t face the issue of paying rent or having to stop operations due to financial constraints. This land is used to build the infrastructure we need, with the community fully involved in our work.

We empower people by training them in skills that sustain our initiatives. Nurses, teachers, and women in the community are equipped with the tools to contribute meaningfully, ensuring that the programmes can continue even when aid decreases. Over time, as people gain financial independence, they can pay for services themselves. Volunteers also play a key role, offering their time and skills.

Direct aid to local NGOs like ours means that resources go straight to those in need. To improve locally led aid, it’s crucial to choose NGOs with a permanent presence and deep community ties. Funds should be transferred directly to these organisations, without intermediaries, and donors should directly oversee projects. Strengthening the capacities of local NGOs is also essential. These steps ensure that aid is both effective and sustainable in our context.



Q&A: REFLECTIONS ON LOCALLY LED AID

‘Locally led action: the norm, not the exception’

An interview with
Tram Nguyen
Chair of DRA and
Shahida Suleiman
Chair of the Local Advisory Group



Tram Nguyen



Shahida Suleiman

Tram, as the new Chair of DRA, could you share your initial thoughts on the current state of the organisation?

Tram: *That’s a bit of a tricky question. I just started as Chair, but I was Vice Chair last year. When I first became Vice Chair, the DRA’s localisation agenda was still in a continuous learning journey. We were working on many things, like the cost-sharing agreement, multi-year contracts, and mainstreaming locally led action into different aspects of our alliance. It was a time of figuring things out — setting things up, deciding how they should work, and finding the right approach. For example, the Local Advisory Group (LAG) was just starting to take shape back then. It felt like a lot of trial and error — in 2023, we didn’t always know the best way forward, but we knew we had to start somewhere.*

Now, in 2024, things are really starting to come together. It’s too early to say that we are achieving all the outcomes on our locally led action agenda, but we certainly are making great progress. We’ve had to push ourselves out of our comfort zones and accept that we don’t always have all the answers, but we’re learning and trying new things. This willingness to experiment and learn has been crucial, and that is why I believe we are on the right track.

Shahida, you were featured in last year’s publication. What progress have you seen since then, particularly regarding the Local Advisory Group’s efforts?

Shahida: *We’ve made a lot of progress since last year! Local actors now have a real say in decision-making for joint responses, like in the DRC and Ethiopia. They’re not just getting funds anymore; they’re actively involved in deciding how those funds are used. That’s a big change.*

We’re pushing for more openness and equal partnerships, where local actors help decide where the money goes and why, instead of just following what donors say. It’s about moving away from the old donor-recipient model and making sure everyone’s voice counts equally. Towards partnerships where both parties equally decide where resources should go, why they should go there. And whether, for example, INGOs should receive more than local NGOs or vice versa. This is a big step forward.

We’re also focusing on mutual learning, where INGOs and local actors learn from each other and use each other’s strengths, instead of following outside ideas of what capacity should be.

What do you think is the secret behind DRA’s success in advancing locally led aid?

Tram: *The key is intent. DRA really makes localisation a priority and is willing to try new ideas, even if it means we might make mistakes along the way. Our partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been flexible, which helps us try different approaches. For example, we added an “intermediary line” in our cost-sharing agreement to cover organisational costs while sharing ICR with local partners. Unfortunately, this line didn’t work out exactly as planned, but we are evaluating and learning from it to develop another solution without losing the progress we’ve made. I believe our intent, open-mindedness, eagerness to learn, and pragmatism have been our key to our success in advancing locally led action.*

“Language is powerful in that it shapes the way we think and forms our beliefs. Using it correctly and consciously can help us overcome biases, change mindsets, and address power imbalances.”

Shahida: *I agree. DRA’s way of partnering is unique. We have a space where we can speak up about what we need, and our feedback is taken seriously. There’s no fear of pushback for pushing too hard. It’s an open partnership where localisation isn’t just a box to tick — it’s a core value.*

What challenges do you see for the Grand Bargain commitments to be successful within the DRA?

Tram: *One big challenge is funding. Local actors want more direct funding, but our current rules don’t allow the DRA to fund local partners directly. We’re looking at creative solutions, like trying out “as direct as possible” funding models. Another challenge is making sure that what we commit to at the Dutch level is carried out consistently in all countries. Sometimes, the decisions we make in The Hague don’t fully reflect or translate our ambitions in the countries where we work, and this inconsistency can be an obstacle to successfully implementing our locally led action agenda.*

Shahida: *Exactly. There’s also a big difference in how things are done in different countries. For example, in Somalia, some INGOs offer multi-year contracts, while others only offer short-term ones, which creates an uneven playing field. Plus, some donor policies don’t always match up with the goals of localisation, which makes it harder to achieve the aims of the Grand Bargain.*

Do you think language plays a role in maintaining power structures in humanitarian aid? How does it impact locally led efforts?

Shahida: *Absolutely, language is important. There has been pushback from local actors about the language used in the humanitarian sector. It’s part of the larger effort to decolonise aid, including the language we use. Often, the way things are phrased is very top-down, and this has been a real issue, especially for actors from the Global South. For example, terms like “capacity building” make it sound like local actors don’t have capacity and need to be “built up,” which isn’t fair. “Mutual capacity strengthening” is a better term, which means INGOs can learn from local actors, too.*

Even the word “localisation” can sometimes feel negative. “Local” often carries a connotation of poor quality or lesser value, which doesn’t help us achieve our goals, like the Grand Bargain commitments. While “locally led aid” or “locally led action” is better, we still hope to find a term that doesn’t come with this baggage. Language plays a big role in how we’re perceived and how we move forward.

Tram: *I completely agree. Language is powerful in that it shapes the way we think and forms our beliefs. Using it correctly and consciously can help us overcome biases, change mindsets, and address power imbalances. For example, at DRA, we make an effort to rethink terms like “beneficiaries” and “field-level” and often emphasise mutual aspects, such as mutual capacity strengthening and mutual learning. We aim to eliminate any top-down or superior tone. These conscious changes are important steps toward achieving equitable partnerships.*

“It’s about moving away from the old donor-recipient model and making sure everyone’s voice counts equally.”



Looking ahead, what milestones do you hope to achieve in the next few years for locally led aid?

Tram: *In the short term, I would like us to strengthen our current milestones, such as improving multi-year contracts, exploring all aspects of risk-sharing, enhancing our mutual capacity-strengthening efforts, and continuing to provide a safe space for feedback from our local partners through our annual partnership survey, translating their feedback into concrete follow-up actions. In the long term, we aim for locally-led action to become the standard practice across the wider humanitarian sector, not just within DRA. This will require continuous learning, adaptation, sharing of best practices, and ongoing advocacy to prioritise locally-led action throughout the sector.*

Shahida: *I'd love to see other donors and organisations in the aid sector learn from what the DRA is doing and start their own versions. The DRA shows that it's possible to give more funding to local actors and involve them in decision-making. My hope is that in a few years, more donors will do the same, leading to real progress in meeting the Grand Bargain commitments.*

Why language matters

Changing the language used in humanitarian aid is important for many reasons. First, it helps remove old colonial attitudes that often see Western organisations as more powerful or superior. Using new language builds equality and trust by choosing words that include and respect everyone, creating stronger partnerships between all actors. It also shows that we are working together as real partners by moving away from terms like 'beneficiaries,' which suggest a one-way relationship, and using words like 'co-investors,' which recognise the active role and contributions of local communities. Finally, clear and inclusive language makes it easier for people from different backgrounds to join the conversation and support locally led development.

The table below shows some of the problematic terms, alternatives that have been put forward, and the reasoning behind this.

Problematic terms	Suggested alternatives	Reasoning
Capacity building	Mutual capacity strengthening / mutual learning	Implies local actors lack capacity and need to be 'built up.' Mutual capacity strengthening recognises that INGOs can also learn from local actors, promoting equality and partnership.
Localisation	Locally led aid / action	Can have a negative connotation, suggesting something of lesser value or poorer quality. Locally led action emphasises leadership and agency of local actors without negative baggage.
Beneficiaries	Co-investors / participants	Suggests a passive role of receiving aid. 'Co-investors' acknowledges active contributions and assets local communities bring, such as knowledge, skills, and relationships.
Global South	Majority world	Reinforces a North-South divide, suggesting inferiority. Majority World is more neutral and reflects the reality of population distribution and diversity.
Developing countries	Global majority	Implies a hierarchy where some countries are less developed. Global Majority is a more inclusive term that does not reinforce such hierarchies.
Poor countries	Low-income countries	Carries a negative connotation and simplifies complex socio-economic realities. 'Low-income countries' is more specific and neutral.

See also: <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/how-use-of-language-can-breathe-life-into-localisation-107920>

Locally led, how?

Co-chairs Localisation Working Group

Locally led aid can only be truly effective and sustainable when it's driven by the priorities, knowledge, and expertise of national and local actors. This means that decision-making must be in the hands of local partners. The international community should offer the resources, support, and flexibility needed for long-term success.



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Within the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), we're putting this into practice through several key approaches. Our funding mechanism is unique, offering multi-annual funding with considerable flexibility for humanitarian priorities. One of the significant steps we've taken as an alliance is the formation of a Local Advisory Group, representing national and local partners from each Protracted Crisis Joint Response. This group steers the DRA's strategic direction and liaises directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We also seek accountability to our local partners through measures like a yearly partnership survey, which allows our partners to evaluate and provide feedback on our collaboration. By allocating Internal Cost Recovery (ICR) and using multi-annual contracts, we aim to ensure quality, flexible funding. Our approach to locally led capacity strengthening centres on allowing local partners to set their own organisational priorities.

For us, real progress comes from translating priorities into practical steps, though we recognise that achieving true local leadership in humanitarian aid takes time. Building trust is essential, yet it can be hindered by challenges like risk transfer. We piloted the risk-sharing framework in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Yemen in 2024 to address barriers to equitable partnership. The pilot focuses on more equitable sharing of risks, seeking a shared risk management approach along the delivery chain that could better ensure effective humanitarian assistance.

Our recommendation for other partners looking to advance localisation is simple: build trust, be consistent, provide structural support and flexibility, and commit to practical actions that drive the necessary structural changes.



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