LOCAL LEADERSHIP LABS

LEARNING JOURNEY

2023 - 2026

Facilitated by CIVICUS | Supported by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

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Special thanks to all Convening Partners for their participation in this process as well as all those interviewed.

CAPAIDS Uganda
FEMME FORTE
IKa (Indonesia untuk Kemanusiaan)
Trend Asia
APN (Africa Philanthropy Network)
I4C-EA (Innovation for Change East-Asia)

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The Context

Locally led development has become a well-established commitment in global development and humanitarian policy through The Grand Bargain, the OECD Recommendations on Enabling Civil Society, the USAID Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development, and others. The gap between those commitments and what local civil society organisations actually experience on the ground remains significant.

That gap widened sharply during the period of this programme. The contraction of US development aid from early 2025, and the ripple effects across bilateral and multilateral funding that followed, accelerated a retreat from direct funding to local actors just as more funders were publicly reaffirming their commitment to it. Funders moved back toward working with intermediaries and compliance requirements tightened. The organisations this programme worked to strengthen are returning to a funding environment that is structurally more hostile to their autonomy and agency than the one they entered.

CIVICUS's role: catalyst, not implementer

A critical feature of LLL was how CIVICUS, as an intermediary partner, played the role of catalyst and connector: providing financial support and non-financial accompaniment to local partners, brokering connections with other stakeholders, facilitating learning across the labs, and where appropriate, amplifying the analysis and asks of the Brave Village to a global audience. CIVICUS was not the implementer. The work was led by the convening partners, supported by CIVICUS.

The programme was designed to be horizontal. One concrete example: when regional convening partners joined, the national and sub-national partners co-designed the regional partners' mandate and terms of reference and were involved in selecting who those partners would be. Regional partners also received less of the grant than national and sub-national partners, because the direct community convening and prototyping was happening at national and sub-national level. In most programmes, regional actors receive more. LLL inverted that logic intentionally, because its commitment was to resource the work where it was actually happening.

What this document is

The Local Leadership Labs (LLL) was a pilot initiative aimed at tackling the political, technical, and behavioural barriers preventing governments, funders, and other stakeholders from adopting and delivering on commitments that recognise, enable, and resource diverse local civil society groups as key development actors in their own right. Facilitated by CIVICUS and supported by the Hilton Foundation, it ran from April 2023 to March 2026.

This Learning Journey captures what happened, what shifted, and what the evidence says matters for the future. It is based on endline interviews with convening partners, their narrative reports, survey data, and three years of programme monitoring.

It sits alongside two companion documents: the LLL Convening Partners Endline Report and the Ecosystem Influencing Endline Assessment, which together provide a complete account of what the programme contributed and what was learned.

Who is this document for?

This document is written for three audiences: the funders who made this work possible and whose decisions hold weight in shaping what comes next; the civil society ecosystem, including organisations, networks, and intermediaries working on locally led development, for whom these learnings are directly relevant; and the convening partners of the Brave Village themselves, as a reflection of what they built and what they said.

> ***"Sustainability of civil society will not come primarily from donors. It comes from the community themselves reclaiming their agency over resources, over knowledge, their network and solidarity. The social capital that community has is barely recognised by donors most of the time."***
>
> **IKa**

WHAT ARE THE LOCAL LEADERSHIP LABS ?

Methodology

LLL was structured in three phases:

1.

Discovery

Strategising, mapping, and building the evidence base from community realities;

2.

Ideation

Co-designing solutions with communities and local actors;

3.

Action

Prototyping and testing those solutions in real conditions.

The programme was explicitly designed as a lab: experimental, non-prescriptive, and oriented toward learning as much as delivery. The methodology was intentionally flexible, and it provided a shared framework that each partner adapted to their own context and what emerged within it. It also took an iterative approach; phases did not impose a sequence, but each stage was designed to allow the next phase to shape itself from what was learned.

> ***The LLL feels more like a starting point rather than a conclusion. The many brilliant ideas that have emerged make it clear that the work will continue. The LLL model is a practical and adaptable framework for growing community philanthropy across Africa. The LLL methodology has been widely appreciated, and we will continue using this same methodology. Resources may come and go, even if resources shrink, the LLL methodology will remain.***
>
> **APN**

Theory of Change

LLL's theory of change held that local civil society actors, given the space, tools, and relationships to lead, would strengthen their capacity to articulate demands, co-create solutions, and influence the stakeholders and systems that shape their communities. CIVICUS' role was to hold the space and reduce barriers, not to lead the work. The Theory of Change was designed to be a living document, intentionally open to revision. It was initially co-created with partners at the inception meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2024, where convening partners were invited to be part of shaping the draft rather than simply receive it. The Theory of Change was later collaboratively revised and developed into an infographic to document the adaptations and response to context as LLL evolved. For many, this was the first time they had been invited to shape a Theory of Change in a programme they were joining.

> ***With CIVICUS, we have moved from a compliance relationship to a dialogue around power and trust, and sustainability.***
>
> **IKa**

The co-creation process also produced a shared definition of locally led development, built from individual partner contributions and synthesised into agreed language by the convening partners committee.

LLL definition of locally led development

Locally led development is an approach centred around local actors (grassroots, individuals, communities, organisations, institutions, social movements) that places agency in the voices of the minoritised, marginalised, and silenced to lead their own decision-making in identifying, planning, and implementing their development processes with local or foreign resources. It intentionally leverages local knowledge, expertise, and resources and prioritises local ownership, sustainability, contextual relevance and mutual accountability. LLD is both culturally-appropriate and culturally-responsive, emanating from local communities' own identified strategies.

For more detail on the methodology and theory of change, see the LLL Methodology document, LLL Theory of Change, and the LLL Co-Design and Prototyping Toolkit.

ABOUT THE CONVENING PARTNERS

THE BRAVE VILLAGE

The Brave Village is the name the convening partners gave themselves. It reflects how they chose to work not as recipients of a programme, but as a cohort with a collective commitment to advancing locally led development from within their own contexts and communities. Six organisations, across Uganda, Indonesia, and their wider regions formed part of this Brave Village.

CAPAIDS Uganda

National **Uganda**

Works with grassroots community-based organisations to enable communities to resist, survive, and overcome socio-economic inequities. Serves as secretariat for the Local Coalition Accelerator and Charter for Change Working Group.

During LLL:

Produced a national position paper on locally led development, grounded in consultations with 130+ actors across seven regions. The paper was requested by the British High Commission and used by CORDAID to shape a five-year strategic plan. Convened an unprecedented national gathering of 165 participants, with duty bearers making real-time commitments in co-creation sessions.

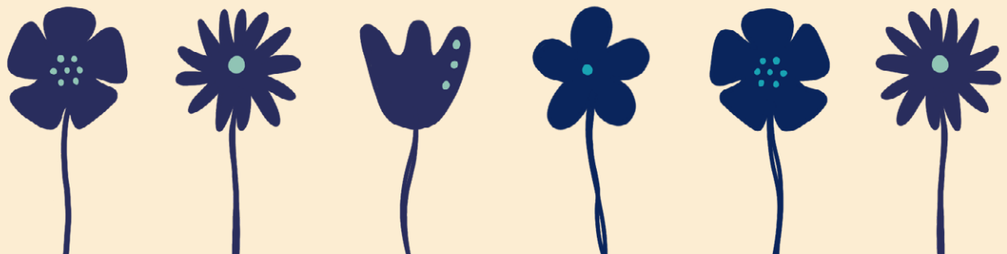
FEMME FORTE

Sub-National **Uganda**

Creates safe environments for the expression, participation, and leadership growth of women in Uganda, with particular focus on traditionally excluded communities. Mission-oriented toward feminist resilience and transformation.

During LLL:

Built and institutionalised an equity circle model, bringing together traditionally excluded communities in co-creation spaces that continue as standing organisational practice. A Joint Action Platform emerged, with pre/post assessments showing a 25% improvement in advocacy and coalition-building knowledge among participants.



IKa Indonesia untuk Kemanusiaan

National **Indonesia**

Raises resources for social transformation across Indonesia, supporting movements for women's rights, ecological justice, human rights memory, and food sovereignty. Their Akar Daya framework positions communities as holders of assets rather than recipients of aid.

During LLL:

Developed and deployed the Akar Daya (Transformative Resourcing) framework across six community prototypes and developed Pamakna, a participatory MEL tool now integrated into regular staff meetings across several partner organisations. Secured independent New Zealand funding to extend the Akar Daya fellowship. Pamakna was presented at the #ShiftThePower Summit and IKa's director spoke at the UN General Assembly.

TREND ASIA

Sub- National **Indonesia**

Accelerates energy transformation and sustainable development in Indonesia, working with communities facing direct impacts of extractive industries. Their entry point into locally led development is structural: communities can only lead when they understand the rights they already hold.

During LLL:

Built a Structural Legal Aid Education model across 25 community sites. Communities in Cianjur, West Java organised across districts to demand the mayor honour commitments on land rights; the mayor acknowledged this as public supervision. Trend Asia describes ownership of this prototype as collective: 'LLL belongs to all of us, including the communities.'

APN Africa Philanthropy Network

Regional **Southeast Africa**

Brings actors in the African philanthropy ecosystem together to articulate a common voice. Functions as infrastructure for collective intelligence on existing and emerging African philanthropic models.

During LLL:

Converted a community-identified barrier (complex taxation rules for CSOs) into a multi-stakeholder advocacy campaign, including a high-level forum convening 30 CSO, Tanzania Revenue Authority, and legal actors in June 2025. Established a CSO-TRA community of practice to sustain the dialogue beyond a single event.

I4C-EA Innovation for Change East-Asia

Regional **Southeast Asia**

Brings together community leaders from across Southeast and Northeast Asia through peer learning, narrative change, and cross-border solidarity. Centres communities narrating on their own terms.

During LLL:

Built two communities of practice from the ground up, the Community Leaders' Learning Institute and the Narrative Builders, bringing together leaders from nine countries. Co-designed the EmpowerNet and AMPLIFY prototypes.

THE LLL JOURNEY SINCE 2023

2023: Before the labs began

Before any convening partners were selected or funded, CIVICUS established a Sounding Board of diverse civil society representatives. Their role was to advise on partner selection, identify priority countries, and stress-test the initial programme framework. The Sounding Board's input directly shaped who was selected, how different partner levels were designed, and how power dynamics between partners were anticipated and addressed from the start. One of its most consequential recommendations was that national and sub-national partners should co-design the mandate and terms of reference for the regional partners, rather than having that defined externally.

2024: Inception phase

The programme's most important work happened before any community consultation took place. In early 2024, CIVICUS convened the national and sub-national convening partners for an in-person inception meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Partners worked together to shape the Theory of Change, define how they would work together, agree on values, and surface the power dynamics already present in the room including those between CIVICUS and the partners themselves. The shift from "them versus us" to "us, the Brave Village" was brought about through deliberate facilitation and intentional programme design.

The regional partners joined after this inception meeting, and this was identified as a gap in the relational foundations of the initiative. It is a design learning that was named honestly: trust-building must happen with everyone, from the start.

Alongside the inception meeting, CIVICUS established a rhythm of regular touchpoints with each convening partner that were flexible enough to respect stretched teams but consistent enough to maintain continuity and sustain the relationship. Stipends were paid to partners and to Theory of Change committee members in recognition that time is not free, and that meaningful participation should not be a privilege available only to those who can afford to give it.

> ***"Usually if the Theory of Change has already been given by the donor, it is something that is set. Pretty much you don't change it. But we made some modifications. I've never experienced that process in my life."***
>
> **IKa**

2024: Discovery

With the foundation in place, the Brave Village moved into discovery. Across two regions, the process looked different in order to meet context appropriately.

In Uganda, CAPAIDS conducted seven regional consultations across the country, from Karamoja to West Nile, engaging over 130 local and national actors. The process was relational from the outset. Funders and diplomatic actors were invited into listening spaces alongside community members, not as funders but as participants. Separate spaces were created for different groups where safety required it, reflecting a recognition that "radical inclusivity sometimes means separation rather than aggregation".

> ***"The best person with the right diagnosis is one facing the challenge. This is why the language and actions have to shift to localisation, shifting power to communities because they understand their own context."***
>
> **LOSCO Uganda,**
> **CAPAIDS local partner**

In Indonesia, IKa accompanied six community partners through the Akar Daya discovery process across Central Java, West Java, Bali, Maluku, and Southeast Sulawesi. Discovery took longer than planned, and deliberately so. Several communities were processing histories of human rights violations, and emotional safety had to be established before co-design work could begin. Trend Asia began mapping communities facing resource extraction and ecological displacement in West Java. APN and I4C-EA began to establish stronger connections with the convening partners in their regions, as well as extending their networks in identifying where partnership could add value rather than extract it.

The findings across both regions were consistent: the barriers to locally led development are not local capacity gaps, but structural issues of power, trust, and resource allocation.

> ***We had never thought of coming together as a community to talk about our pressing issues. Today we are privileged to have identified common problems, which is access to health services. As people of Arivu, we will lobby to improve our hygiene to prevent diseases and reduce congestion at the health centre.***
>
> **Youth Councillor, Arivu, Uganda, CAPAIDS local partner**

2025: Ideation and co-design

The ideation phase brought the Brave Village into shared methodological space. In May 2025, the cohort convened at the CIVICUS Global Solutions Lab in Bangkok, combining an in-person co-design workshop with two virtual sessions. Partners mapped their stakeholder ecosystems, identified shared priorities, and collectively shaped the direction of the next phase.

In August 2025, in-person co-design workshops were held in Uganda and Indonesia, facilitated using inclusive, trauma-informed, and power-aware approaches. Across both countries the same dynamic emerged: partners were not only interested in generating prototypes. They wanted to master the process itself and run co-design and facilitation in their own communities, in their own languages, on their own terms. The programme adapted and a Training of Trainers model was co-developed with partners, grounded in knowledge and learning systems.

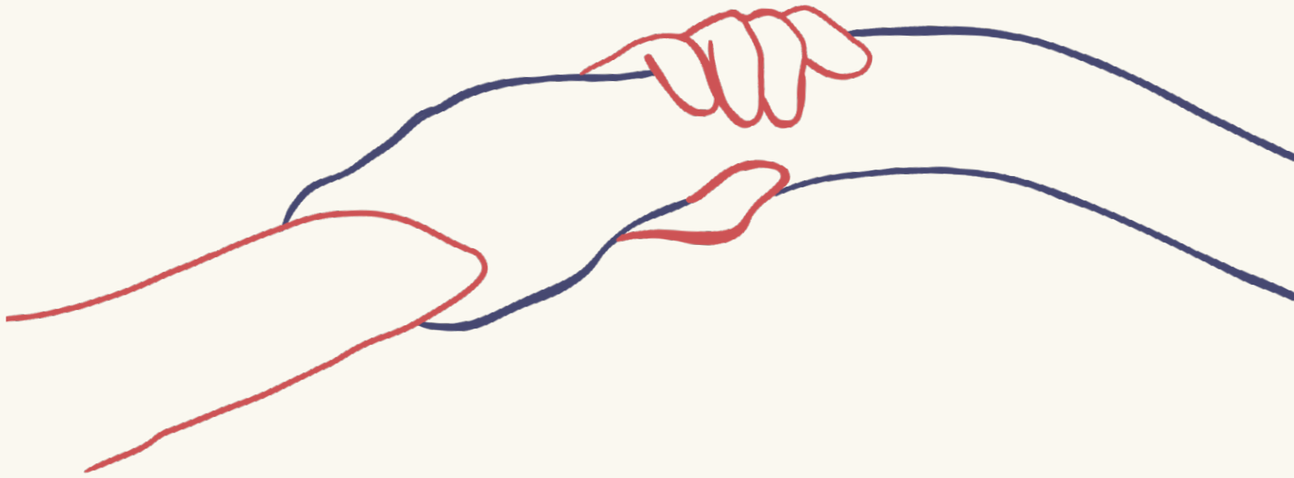
A shared realisation surfaced during this phase across multiple partners: their organisations were stronger on communication than on knowledge management. They were generating insights continuously but lacked sufficient systems to capture, organise, or transfer them. The co-design workshops became as much about strengthening internal organisational learning as about producing external prototypes.

The ideation phase also had to adapt to a shifting external environment. As the global funding landscape contracted significantly during 2025, partners were navigating day-to-day survival alongside programme commitments. The programme's flexibility to respond to this was not a compromise but a display of the adaptable model in action. Between workshops, a four-part learning newsletter kept knowledge alive, with each edition revisiting one phase of the co-design process and offering practical reflections.

2025–2026: Action

The action phase was where ideas met the ground. What partners prototyped varied significantly, genuinely reflecting the commitment to context-specific, locally defined solutions. In Western Uganda, community members organised independently to monitor medication delivery at a local health facility without direct CAPAIDS involvement. In Indonesia, communities in Cianjur organised across districts to collectively confront the mayor over unmet land rights commitments. In Tanzania, APN's advocacy convened 30 representatives of CSOs, Tanzania Revenue Authority officials, and legal actors in a forum that shifted the conversation from adversarial to collaborative.

Throughout this phase, the Brave Village continued to meet, reflect, and learn together. In November 2025, the cohort came together for a peer-to-peer learning session to take stock of what had shifted, celebrate what had been built, and decide collectively what practices and commitments they would carry forward.



WHAT WAS BUILT

The programme was designed as a lab, not a delivery mechanism. What partners built reflects that: the outputs are varied, context-specific, and in several cases still in early use. What they share is that they were built from the ground up, by the partners and communities doing the work, rather than imported or imposed.

Evidence that travels

A highly consequential outcome of the programme was a body of community-generated evidence capable of moving between spaces. CAPAIDS produced a national position paper documenting the structural bottlenecks facing local actors across Uganda: the quality of funding, weak partnership structures, and the dependency dynamics embedded in relationships with INGOs. That paper was validated at national level, cited at a national CSO forum, used by CORDAID to shape a five-year strategic plan, and requested directly by the British High Commission. Community-generated data from Karamoja to West Nile gave CAPAIDS and their partners something concrete to walk into rooms with, and changed its posture in those rooms.

APN produced a parallel body of knowledge focused on the philanthropy ecosystem in Tanzania, including a philanthropy support actor mapping and a co-created advocacy agenda on charitable status for CSOs. These were not reports produced for funders. They were tools developed with and for members, designed to feed back into advocacy and coalition-building.

Spaces that became practices

Several partners built spaces that outlasted the formal programme activities that generated them. FEMME FORTE's equity circle model was developed to bring together traditionally excluded communities, and became and embedded institutional practice. As FEMME FORTE described it: "That work will never stop. We're always going to be doing this now."

CAPAIDS built a network of 14 co-conveners across Uganda's districts, each assuming facilitation leadership within their own jurisdictions. The cross-district learning relationships that emerged were not designed in advance. They developed through the process and extended beyond it. Notably, for organisations like Sisters of Hope in Lira City, this was their first direct financial and programmatic partnership, enabling them to open a bank account and formalise their operations.

Community-facing tools and methodologies

Trend Asia built a Structural Legal Aid Education model across 25 community sites in Indonesia, iteratively refined to ensure legal literacy content was genuinely accessible and aligned with community-held values rather than imported legal frameworks.

IKa developed the Akar Daya methodology, an alternative resourcing method grounding a three-phase process in community asset-mapping rather than deficit analysis, and introduced a simple budget tool that reframes the opening question from "how does the community access funding?" to "what does the community already have?" IKa also developed Pamakna, a participatory, reflection-based monitoring, evaluation, and learning process that allows organisations to document their own journeys without extracting knowledge. For several partner organisations, Pamakna became a standing tool integrated into regular staff meetings, a genuine methodological contribution to the sector.

I4C-EA built two communities of practice, the Community Leaders' Learning Institute and the Narrative Builders, bringing together grassroots leaders from nine countries. These emerged directly from what the discovery phase surfaced as priorities: alternative resourcing and holistic security on one track; narrative strategy and community-controlled storytelling on the other.

A shared methodology, made transferable

At the cohort level, the Brave Village worked with a learning partner to produce a co-design and prototyping toolkit, structured around four phases of participatory design and built for adaptation rather than replication. It is the most tangible shared output of the programme and the clearest expression of its Training of Trainers logic: the Brave Village did not only use the methodology, they now hold it.

What was built, and what was not

Not everything that was prototyped reached the stage of being fully tested. The action phase was shorter and more constrained than intended, and some prototypes remain at early-stage concept level. I4C-EA was direct about this limitation: convening communities for co-creation and then not providing resources to see ideas through risks being experienced as extractive by those communities. That is an honest and important observation about what is missing, not a critique of what was built.

What the programme did build, consistently and across all six partners, was the internal capacity to run these processes again: the facilitation skills, the methodological confidence, and in several cases the tools themselves. The prototype, in many instances, was also the method.

WHAT HAS SHIFTED

Three years into a pilot programme designed to strengthen locally led development, the evidence points to shifts that were real, uneven, and in several cases exceeded what partners themselves had anticipated at the outset.

From positioning to practice

The most consistent shift across the Brave Village was movement from having a set of ideas about locally led development to being able to demonstrate them. Concepts that had existed in strategy documents and conversations became things partners could point to, test, and defend.

IKa named this directly: the work evolved from a framework into a lived practice. A model for transformative, solidarity-based resourcing that had been discussed internally for years was, through LLL, prototyped with communities and brought into international spaces with credibility.

> ***LLL gives us more confidence because we materialised it. A lot of conversation in international spaces is 3000 feet above the ground. But because we materialised it, we provide a lot more insight to this process. LLL gave us the space to test it. Without LLL, these conversations would likely remain conversations without anchoring, without earthing it into reality.***
>
> **IKa,**
> **Endline interview, 2026**

APN's shift operated at a different level but followed the same logic. LLL did not change APN's analysis of what is wrong with the development funding system but gave that analysis grounding and a platform. CAPAIDS-generated community evidence, amplified through the regional webinar APN co-hosted with CAPAIDS and FEMME FORTE in September 2025, gave the argument that the barriers to locally led development are not local capacity gaps but issues of power, trust, and resource allocation, more force because it was now backed by three years of documented community experience.

Confidence in engaging differently

At baseline, convening partners were already engaged actors in their ecosystems. What shifted was the level and range of that engagement, and the confidence with which partners entered spaces they would previously have approached more cautiously.

CAPAIDS moved from operating within its existing networks to securing appointments with the British High Commission, UNICEF, and government counterparts, presenting community-generated evidence rather than just institutional requests. Organisations that had never previously contacted CAPAIDS began reaching out, directly reflecting the advocacy it had been doing on what equitable partnership with local actors should look like.

> ***The most important lesson is about championing and bringing local actors to the table of decision-making. Local actors felt tremendous value in being able to speak to duty bearers and community members and to say: this works, this doesn't work in our area. In West Nile, a leader noted it was the first time local and community leaders had sat together to discuss community challenges without political argument and focused entirely on understanding roles and acting without waiting for government.***
>
> **CAPAIDS Uganda,**
> **Endline interview, 2026**

FEMME FORTE described a similar acceleration: engaging universities, private sector actors, and communities outside their established domain. "I think it may have naturally happened, but I think it may have been accelerated," was how they framed it. A pre- and post-assessment of their Joint Action Platform convening showed a 25% improvement in participants' knowledge of advocacy frameworks, coalition-building, and stakeholder engagement.

From compliance to dialogue

The relationship between convening partners and CIVICUS shifted over the course of the programme. IKa described moving from a compliance-oriented relationship to one grounded in dialogue around power, trust, and sustainability. This was not incidental to the programme's purpose but a demonstration of it.

I4C-EA's shift extended this logic inward. The Narrative Builders community of practice surfaced a direct assertion from communities: that they are the owners and holders of their own narratives, and that intermediary organisations (including I4C itself) too often speak for and take up the space of the communities they work with. I4C named this as a point of organisational self-reflection and an opportunity for transformation: stepping back and refraining from appropriating community narratives. Its practical implications are still being worked through, but the recognition itself matters.

> ***"Being part of the Narrative Builders COP made me realize that we really have different ways of building our narratives and telling our stories mostly because we work in different thematic and geographic contexts."***
>
> **Community organisation,**
> **I4C-EA local partner**

Community agency, not just organisational capacity

Several of the most significant shifts happened at community level, beyond the convening partners themselves. In Western Uganda, community members organised independently to monitor medication delivery at a local government health facility, without direct CAPAIDS involvement. In Cianjur, Indonesia, communities organised across districts to collectively confront the mayor over unmet land rights commitments, achieving notable public pressure on local government.

> ***"Every individual has a sense of urgency, but this urgency needs to be ignited or stimulated. LLL is one of the tools and one of the mediums we can utilise to activate the sense of urgency within each and every person. When agency is activated, then people will not only rely on a certain character to reach their goals. They will gather to create a huge movement to reach their needs."***
>
> **Trend Asia,**
> **Endline interview, 2026**

What did not shift, or shifted less than intended

The action phase was compressed by the contraction of the global funding environment in 2025. Partners were navigating organisational survival alongside programme commitments, and the depth of prototyping in some cases fell short of what had been envisioned. Knowledge management remained underdeveloped in several organisations even as partners recognised its importance. The shift from project delivery logic to ecosystem strengthening logic had begun, but IKa's own assessment was that this was "early work" with the foundations laid but not the structure built.

The programme also surfaced a persistent tension: communities and organisations remain vulnerable to reverting to donor-dependent patterns when external support withdraws. LLL created conditions for questioning those patterns, but the programme's own timeframe was not long enough to determine whether new practices would hold.

WHAT PRACTICES, LEARNINGS, AND COMMITMENTS SHOULD BE CARRIED FORWARD

When convening partners were asked what should be protected at all costs in any future iteration, and what they would do differently, their answers were consistent enough to constitute a collective position. What follows draws directly on those responses.

Protect the lab framing and what it makes possible

The single most consistently named thing to protect was the lab structure itself: the flexibility, the openness, and the explicit commitment to learning over performance. IKa was direct: *"What should be protected at all costs is the flexibility. The openness. The space for experimentation. The fact that it is a lab. The way CIVICUS held the space is very important. Not making it performance-based. Not making it about speed or deliverables only."*

CAPAIDS named the same thing differently: being part of the design process, having the Theory of Change co-created, and having a genuine safe space to share perspectives openly must be preserved. FEMME FORTE described it as CIVICUS's way of showing up with kindness and genuine openness, making it a safe space to engage, ask questions, and feel supported. These are not abstract relational preferences. They describe the specific conditions that enabled partners to take risks, name problems honestly, and work at a pace that matched their contexts.

The methodology should outlast the funding

APN made a commitment that no other partner stated as directly: the LLL methodology will continue regardless of whether resources continue. As APN reflected in October 2025: "Resources may come and go, even if resources shrink, the LLL methodology will remain." APN also named the broader lesson: co-creation builds ownership and ensures solutions reflect local realities rather than external priorities; phased, context-specific engagement enables flexibility; and community philanthropy, storytelling, and donor mapping are practical approaches that can be sustained and replicated by members independently of the programme.

Move from individual prototyping to intentional ecosystem building, and recognise what already exists

In this first phase, partners tested ideas individually, organisation by organisation. IKa identified this as a limitation: *"We see that solidarity economy needs an ecosystem. It cannot just be individual organisations testing alone."*

CAPAIDS reinforced this from a different direction, naming the underutilisation of existing local and national networks as a persistent gap: those networks already exist across communities and regions, but they are not being activated. They need support and scaffolding, not the creation of parallel structures. CAPAIDS also distilled four interlocking lessons about what already exists and is being consistently overlooked: local philanthropy is transforming lives and needs to be recognised and catalysed; local and national networks are underutilised; government at multiple levels is critical for locally led development to become reality; and pooled, locally led funding consortiums are viable and should be expanded.

Reframe what funding is for

IKa named this as a structural commitment for funders: donor funding at community level should be understood as accompaniment funding, not project-delivery funding. CIVICUS' flexible reporting model is, in IKa's assessment, the benchmark for what accompaniment looks like in practice. The requirement to provide three comparable funding sources when budgeting was also identified as a persistent barrier at grassroots level - manageable for national convening partners, not workable for grassroots communities.

CAPAIDS's parallel learning concerned timing: the timely release of resources is critical when working at community level. Communities have their own rhythms and when resources are delayed, momentum and content that would otherwise emerge is lost.

Invest more time in the action phase, and resource it

Multiple partners named the action phase as the most constrained. CAPAIDS noted that the three-phase cycle was strong, but the action phase needed more time to test prototypes, document what was and was not working, and enable cross-learning. I4C-EA made a related point that convening communities for co-creation and not providing resources to see ideas through risks being experienced as extractive by those communities.

Build cross-partner relationships earlier and in person

FEMME FORTE identified a gap, echoed by others, of insufficient in-person engagement between the convening partners themselves, particularly in the earlier phases. Virtual engagement does not substitute for shared physical space, particularly across cultural contexts that may appear similar but are not. Early in-person convenings between partners, co-designed around a shared theme, would have built an even stronger relational foundation for peer support that came later but could have come sooner.

WHAT WE LEARNED

1. Trust is architecture, not attitude

Partners consistently named the quality of the CIVICUS relationship as a substantive contributor to what they were able to do, not because of goodwill alone, but because of specific design choices: co-creating the Theory of Change at the first convening; monthly one-to-one check-ins; absorbing the reporting burden rather than passing it to partners; creating explicit permission to experiment and fail.

Two further design decisions are worth naming explicitly. First, communication was intentionally designed to focus on talking with partners, not at them, responding meaningfully to every message, grounded in years of prior experience with grassroots actors. Second, the CIVICUS team made a conscious choice not to transmit pressure downward. Partners on the ground were already navigating significant pressure and so absorbing that pressure at the intermediary level, and de-escalating where needed, was a wellbeing and trust decision as much as a management one. These are not soft features of a good team, but replicable design choices that should be named as such for other intermediaries.

> ***"We don't have to hold back for fear of being judged. Locally-led development really requires time and relational investment."***
>
> **IKa**

2. The intended model was prototype-centred, but what emerged was practice-centred

The programme was designed around generating new prototypes. What actually happened was far deeper: organisations strengthened and extended the work they were already doing. Durable outcomes emerged from partners' existing roots and ways of working. The learning for programme designers and funders is that supporting locally led organisations to go deeper with their own work is often more generative than expecting them to generate new experiments on top of existing commitments.

> ***"The strict eligibility criteria for donor funding eliminate most local organisations before we can even apply. The system seems designed to keep us out."***
>
> **Local actor,**
> **Uganda discovery consultation**

3. The barriers to locally led development are structural, not organisational

CAPAIDS's discovery findings were direct. Across local actors engaged in Uganda:

43% **of funding received by local actors was activity-based or quarterly, with no institutional support component.**

68% **received no institutional support from donors.**

APN and CAPAIDS reached the same conclusion: the barriers to locally led development are not local capacity gaps but issues of power, trust, and resource allocation. This finding has direct implications for how programmes like LLL should be designed and evaluated, and for what funders need to change.

4. Learning is strongest where there are concrete tools, spaces, and products

Where learning loops formed during the programme, there were specific, concrete ingredients: IKa's Pamakna reflection tool; CAPAIDS's discovery report; Trend Asia's iterative structural legal aid module; I4C-EA's communities of practice. Where learning was left as an aspiration without dedicated infrastructure, it remained aspirational. Learning has to be resourced and structured, not expected as a byproduct.

5. Enabling and resourcing are not the same thing

The programme built confidence, tools, and institutional positioning for local actors. It did not build a clear pathway to sustained independent resourcing. Partners are returning to a funding environment that has contracted significantly since the programme began, with funders retreating to intermediaries, compliance requirements tightening, and direct local funding harder to access than when LLL started. The gap between enabling local actors and connecting them to sustainable resourcing is the most significant design gap this programme reveals.

> ***"A lot of people talk about shrinking civic space. But they seldom talk about shrinking civic space in terms of resourcing."***
>
> **IKa,**
> **Endline interview**

HOW CIVICUS WORKED

The sector is actively debating what the role of international intermediaries should be. Frameworks from the Grand Bargain, Peace Direct, and the RINGO initiative have all proposed that INGOs need to shift from implementation toward roles such as process facilitation, accompaniment, and advocacy. LLL went further: it demonstrated what that shift looks like in operational practice, with documented evidence of what it requires and what it produces. What follows is not a description of good intentions. It is a description of specific, replicable choices that other intermediaries can make.

Inquiry, not instruction

This kind of work requires significant internal capacity. It cannot be done on the margins of an existing workplan. It requires staff who are in a genuine posture of inquiry: spending time understanding partners' needs, listening before directing, and talking with convening partners rather than at them. CIVICUS invested heavily in this. Communication was intentional, responsive, and meaningful at every stage. As Taís Siqueira, LLL Coordinator, reflected: to build trust and meaningful and transformative relationships, communication is very important. How you show up, how you communicate, how you engage - this is how trust is built. Not by just saying you have a trustful relationship.

Absorbing pressure, not transmitting it

CIVICUS made a deliberate choice not to transmit pressure to convening partners. There is usually institutional pressure on staff to pass urgency, timelines, and compliance anxiety down to partners. The LLL team absorbed that pressure instead, de-escalating where there was misunderstanding, and staying conscious of the fact that partners were already navigating significant pressure on the ground. The mental health and wellbeing of partners was treated as a relevant concern, not a peripheral one. Concretely, the team took on the administrative burden of narrative reporting, collating monthly check-in notes so that partners did not have to write separate reports.

> ***"This kind of respect for local actors' time is quite rare and we are grateful."***
>
> **IKa,**
> **Endline interview**

Mindset onboarding, not just ways-of-working onboarding

This was also about how CIVICUS built its own internal team. Staff were onboarded not only to ways of working, but to the underlying mindset: why the work is done this way, what it asks of the people doing it, and how to genuinely hold space rather than manage a process. The distinction between ways-of-working onboarding and mindset onboarding is one the team names explicitly. It takes time, and it cannot be shortcut. It is also rarely funded, funders who want intermediaries to operate as catalysts rather than implementers need to fund the core strategic capacity that makes this possible: the relationship-building, the inquiry, the absorption of pressure, and the internal investment in how staff show up.

The LLL Co-Design and Prototyping Toolkit documents the methods and approaches used across the programme and makes them available for others to adapt and use. It is a practical resource for any organisation, intermediary, or funder wanting to understand how this way of working translates into practice.

WHAT ACTORS CAN DO DIFFERENTLY

The following recommendations are grounded in what partners said, what the evidence shows, and what the current ecosystem context demands. They are addressed to the different actors who will determine what comes next.

For catalysts

Make ecosystem building intentional. The most significant unintended outcome of this programme of partner organisations exchanging skills independently, communities implementing prototypes without external instruction was not designed for. A future LLL could build structured conditions for cross-partner solidarity and skill exchange from the start.

Build a funder relationship pathway alongside community enabling. The gap between enabling local actors and connecting them to sustained resourcing is a significant design gap this programme reveals. A future iteration should explicitly support partners to navigate direct funder relationships, not by positioning CIVICUS as intermediary, but by accompanying partners as they enter those spaces with evidence and confidence.

Protect the lab conditions as structural commitments. The flexibility and permission to experiment that partners named as generative need to be built into programme architecture as explicit, named features visible to funders and partners alike, not dependent on facilitation style to maintain.

Reconsider compliance requirements at grassroots level. The three-source comparison requirement for fund use was identified by IKa as a persistent barrier for community-level actors. Compliance requirements designed for INGOs cannot be applied unchanged to grassroots actors and still claim to support locally led development.

Document community co-investment. Spaces, time, food, transport, social capital, the contributions communities make that do not appear in any budget line also do not appear in any evaluation. A future programme should build documentation of these inputs into the design from the start.

> ***"CIVICUS has been a uniquely different partner. Its approach in believing in local expertise and creating a safe space for partners to freely share what works best for their communities has been unlike any previous partnership experience. Many partnerships in the sector have involved being talked down to, with compromises required to find a middle way. CIVICUS's approach has stood apart from that. CAPAIDS was involved in the design process, helped redesign the theory of change, and was given genuine openness to co-shape the work."***
>
> **CAPAIDS Uganda,**
> **Endline interview, 2026**

For funders

Provide longer, more flexible funding as the default. The tension between community pace and programme timelines was named by multiple partners. Multi-year, flexible funding is a prerequisite for genuine locally led work, not a preference to be negotiated case by case.

Fund prototypes through to action. I4C-EA named directly that convening communities to generate prototypes and then not resourcing those prototypes feels extractive. Funders that want to support locally led development need to fund the action phase, not just the ideation.

Direct more funding to local actors. The evidence from CAPAIDS's discovery phase is clear: most local actors in Uganda receive activity-based or short-term funding with no institutional support. Making locally led development real requires changing funding architecture, not only affirming principles.

Invest in the connective infrastructure of the ecosystem: peer learning, cross-partner exchanges, solidarity networks. The outcomes that were most durable in this programme happened in the spaces between formal activities. This infrastructure is rarely funded and should be.

For local organisations

Document your contributions and your communities' contributions. If community co-investment of spaces, time, social capital is not written down, it does not exist in any record that matters to funders or policymakers.

Use the tools and methodological confidence from LLL to narrate on your own terms. Communities and local actors are the rightful authors of their own development stories. Take that framing into funder spaces, policy spaces, and public platforms.

The work continues beyond this programme. IKa's 30-year vision. CAPAIDS's position as a routing point for government communications. Trend Asia's community legal literacy model. FEMME FORTE's equity circles. APN's philanthropy networks. I4C-EA's communities of practice. The programme has ended; the learning and the relationships have not.

The prototypes developed through the Local Leadership Labs represent real, tested, community-grounded approaches to locally led development. They need continued investment to reach their potential. We invite funders and allies to engage directly with the convening partners to explore how to support what they have built.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

LLL Guiding Manual

LLL Methodology document

LLL Theory of Change

LLL Co-Design and Prototyping Toolkit

LLL VOICES

> *When we listen to each other beyond the organisation names and logos, we realise we're fighting the same battles just in different corners.*
>
> **Community partner, Uganda, FEMME FORTE, local partner**

> *It's so necessary to have a safe space in which we are able to share our experiences, also as a way of knowing each other more and learning to amplify our own stories and also each other's.*
>
> **Community organisation, Philippines, I4C-EA, local partner**

> *Community leaders are important because the movement for change is essentially in their hands. Now we are taking ways of advocacy where NGOs are not the lead group, but ensuring that community movements are at the frontline of change.*
>
> **CLLI Community member, Indonesia, I4C-EA, local partner**

> *This is the first time an NGO has consulted us on our issues. We are very grateful to CAPAIDS Uganda for this approach. Usually, they only come to fix our problems and disappear.*
>
> **Kakungu Village, Uganda, CAPAIDS local partner**

> *What I find interesting is that these trainings involved several groups, ranging from communities and young people to organizational leaders. This shows that when given the opportunity, these three elements of the community can develop a common way of thinking.*
>
> **CCLI Community member, Indonesia, I4C-EA local partner**

> *We also understand more about the power of narrative: how voices from local people can become 'power within'. This continues to shape new ways of our work in collecting information, writing stories, and finding suitable mediums to share struggles, challenges, success cases, and more, in order to gain broader support.*
>
> **NBCOP community member, Indonesia, I4C-EA local partner**

> *We've learned that we don't have to choose between safety and participation. Your story showed us how to hold both.*
>
> **CSO leader, Uganda, FEMME FORTE, local partner**

Systems Thinking
Power-building
FEMME FORTE
Uganda
TREND ASIA
Indonesia
Reflective
I4C-EA
(Innovation For Change, East-Asia)
Southeast Africa
LOCAL
LEADERSHIP
LABS
APN
(Africa Philanthropy Network)
Southeast Africa
Locally Driven
IKa
(Indonesia untuk Kemanusiaan)
Indonesia
CAPAIDS
Uganda
Cultivating Accountability
Radically Inclusive