



LOCALIZATION IN ACTION: VOICES OF WOMEN-LED AND WOMEN RIGHTS' ORGANIZATIONS IN UGANDA



Overview

The Grand Bargain, a pact between donors and aid providers, promised to direct 25% of global humanitarian funding to local responders. However, Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) and Women Rights' Organizations (WROs) in Uganda continue to struggle with insufficient funding and bureaucratic challenges.

Between April and June 2024, CARE, in collaboration with the Charter4Change Uganda Secretariat, and the National Association of Women's Organizations in Uganda (NAWOU), conducted a series of consultative workshops across six sub regions of the country. These consultations brought together WLOs, WROs, and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) to share their experiences, challenges, and priorities in advocating for more locally-led Humanitarian and Development Response.

Participants from regions including Karamoja, Northern Uganda, Western Uganda, West Nile, Eastern Uganda and Kampala provided compelling insights into the realities they face. Despite the Grand Bargain's ambition to allocate 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, less than 1% of aid focused on women and girls reached WLOs and WROs directly. The consultations offered a rare platform for grassroots voices to be heard, highlighting persistent funding inequities, structural exclusion, and the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable funding practices in Uganda's humanitarian and development landscape.

Voices from WLOs' and WROs' Consultations

1. The Struggle Beneath the Surface



During the consultations, a Local National Actor shared a sentiment that resonated deeply across the room. "We are hopeful," they said. "Because even if the doors haven't opened fully, at least now, someone is listening." This hope was echoed by local WLOs and WROs, who voiced a shared vision for the future; a collaborative platform that brings together government agencies, international NGOs, and local actors. A space where funding flows more freely, partnerships grow stronger, and development efforts finally reach the people they are meant to serve.

One Local National Actor put it plainly: "We need a unified approach for sustainable change." There is progress—more conversations, more recognition. Local voices have been persistent, calling on donors to ease the restrictions that keep local organizations at arm's length. As one Local National Actor expressed: "We haven't yet reached the level where we receive direct funding, but we have made noise." The change, they say, is still more promise than practice. The current aid system isn't working for those who need it most. But the growing dialogue and acknowledgment offer a glimmer of possibility.

2. Rethinking the Rules of the Game



Many WLOs, WROs, and Refugee-Led Organizations face major funding barriers due to complex donor requirements, limited technical capacity, and weak financial systems. These challenges are worsened by perceptions of local actors as "high risk," which undermines trust and partnership. In response, LNAs are calling for a more equitable funding model, one that values their leadership, invests in their growth, and builds trust. "Donors have started working with local actors, and this is an opportunity to learn and unlearn," one local leader shared. "However, donors should come back to the drawing board and treat us like partners—take the risk to trust us and offer institutional support," affirmed another.

3. Lost in Translation - The Language of Localization



WLOs, WROs, and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) are stepping up as first responders and long-term change makers. Yet, despite their critical role, they face persistent barriers to accessing the resources they need. Yet, even as donors begin to engage more with local actors, a fundamental issue remains: confusion over who qualifies as “local.” Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and national NGOs are often grouped together, masking the unique needs and contributions of each of these organizations.

“CBOs and national organizations have been mixed up, and grassroots organizations that often operate solely within the district boundaries must be distinctly mapped to ensure equitable access to resources”. Shared one LNA. Without clear, shared definitions and frameworks, it becomes difficult to ensure that support reaches the right organizations, especially those led by and for women. WLOs/WROs emphasize that standardizing this language is a crucial first step towards fairer, more effective humanitarian aid.

4. Women and Girls - Still on the Sidelines



Despite global commitments to promote equality of women and girls, women in local development continue to face significant challenges. In Uganda and many parts of the Global South, WLOs and WROs receive less than 1% of women and girls-focused aid directly, according to the [OECD](#).

Leadership roles for women remain limited, and deeply rooted norms continue to hinder progress. They believe that meaningful progress requires more than just words; it needs targeted funding and training that allows them to grow and thrive. “Development should be championed by WLOs, WROs, because women are like baggage carriers of all sorts of issues affecting humanity”. Noted one LNA.

Amidst limited funding and training, WLOs/WROs struggle to influence decisions or scale their impact. WLOs and WROs argue that real integration of women and girls' programming will be slow until donors back their words with flexible, long-term financial support and invest in building the capacity of WLOs and WROs.

5. The Founder's Dilemma



In many grassroots organizations across Uganda, the original founders often remain in leadership positions while juggling multiple roles, including those related to finance. This phenomenon, known as ‘founder dilemma,’ can lead to governance challenges, such as limited oversight and decision-making bottlenecks. However, it also plays a vital role in keeping these organizations operational, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

Founders typically carry the vision, maintain important relationships, and possess institutional memory, all of which are essential for sustaining operations. Local partners recommend providing support to facilitate smoother leadership transitions and to strengthen governance systems. This approach aims to strike a balance between continuity and accountability.

6. Proving Localization Works - The Case of CARE Uganda

CARE Uganda is demonstrating that localization is not just a principle, it's a practice. Through initiatives like the Sustainable Transition to Locally Led Emergency and Protection Services (STEPS) Consortium and Women's Voice and Leadership (WVL), CARE is shifting power where it belongs, into the hands of local partners.

“A forum like this enables us to realign; at the core of localization is the organization of local actors to deliver effectively within their context. To advance, we must clearly identify and strengthen the systems that support this process. — LNA 1

“In the next 10 years, we'll see funding come directly to us—because we're being given the mandate. The final dream is to organize local actors into a platform that enables access to funds.” — LNA 2

“I wish more organizations would benchmark CARE. Where do they get the drive to invest in localization? Their deliberate effort to sub-grant, build capacity, and nurture us to stand on our own—it's not easy, but CARE has taken that risk. Now, the onus is on us.” — LNA 3

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness and equity of development aid for WLOs, WROs, and RLOs, participants offered the following recommendations:

Capacity Sharing and Mentorship

To make localization meaningful, capacity strengthening must be a top priority. WLOs, WROs, and RLOs need more than funding; they need mentorship, technical skill-building, and long-term, unrestricted support. Donors and INGOs have a critical role to play. They must invest in capacity through tailored training and mentorship. Provide flexible funding that allows local organizations to grow sustainably. Avoid “staff poaching”, a practice that weakens local institutions by drawing away their most skilled personnel.

Enhanced Awareness and Communication

The C4C Secretariat and INGOs must improve their understanding of the Grand Bargain and C4C commitments, facilitating open discussions with local actors about equitable aid structures. This increased awareness will foster a shared vision and commitment to change.

Mapping and Visibility

Many operate at the grassroots level, deeply embedded in their communities, yet remain invisible to donors and decision-makers. To change this, the C4C Secretariat should maintain an up-to-date, accessible database of WLOs, WROs, and RLOs. This would not only improve their visibility but also enhance their access to funding, partnerships, and capacity-building opportunities. Government cooperation in these efforts could further streamline eligibility verification and amplify the voices of local organizations, ensuring that those closest to the challenges are also closest to the solutions.

Funding and Compliance Structures that works for Local Actors

Donor agencies and international NGOs need to reevaluate their financing requirements to ensure they are both accessible, including indirect costs, provide unrestricted funding, and simplify compliance and reporting processes. It is essential to prioritize funding for WLOs, especially those operating in marginalized or under-resourced areas, to ensure a more equitable distribution of aid. The landscape of humanitarian aid is evolving. Now it's time to redefine the rules with local actors at the center.

Strengthened Coordination and Advocacy

C4C should promote an inclusive decision-making environment by integrating local organizations into funding and eligibility processes and addressing policy barriers. Increased advocacy for fair and accessible compliance standards, coupled with active anti-fraud measures, is crucial.

Holistic Integration

Expanding beyond the Development Assistance Committee's current target of 43% of aid aimed at enhancing equality of women and girls compared to men and boys, true integration must involve dedicated resources for Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) and Women-Rights' Organizations (WROs). This approach should foster inclusive leadership and ensure that resources are allocated in a manner that meets the diverse needs of all individuals.

How CARE is Transforming Localization and Supporting Responsive Aid for Women and Girls in Uganda



CARE Uganda is taking bold steps to shift power and resources closer to the 61-plus local actors (40 WLOs/WROs/RLOs) impacting over 960,000 women and girls by FY24, particularly by empowering Women-Led Organizations (WLOs), Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs). Through the ECHO-funded STEPS project, CARE has embedded local leadership into decision-making structures, with WLOs, such as Humanitarian Assistance Development Services, now holding influential roles, including Vice Chair on the project's Steering Committee. This approach not only strengthens local ownership but also ensures that humanitarian responses are more relevant and responsive to community needs.



Beyond leadership inclusion, CARE is investing heavily in capacity sharing and mentorship through the provision of technical training, unrestricted funding, and institutional support to help local partners grow sustainably. CARE is also addressing harmful practices, such as "staff poaching," which often undermines local organizations by drawing away their most skilled personnel. Transparency is another cornerstone of CARE's approach local actors are actively involved in budget planning and receive a fair share of indirect cost recovery, helping to build trust and accountability within the aid system.



CARE's financial commitment to localization is gaining real momentum. By the end of FY2024, 30% of CARE Uganda's budget was directly allocated to Local and National Actors (LNAs), with nearly 75% of that going to Women-Led and Women's Rights Organizations (WLOs/WROs). In 2025, this increased to over 40%, with more than 60% in humanitarian programming. Beyond funding, CARE is also providing in-kind support, including vehicles, motorcycles, and ICT equipment, to strengthen operational capacity. Through initiatives like the Women's Voice and Leadership (WVL) project, CARE continues to support WLOs and WROs in enhancing governance and systems. These efforts go beyond donor compliance, they represent a long-term investment in equity, inclusion, and sustainability for local women-led leadership.

Conclusion - From Insights to Impact

The future of locally led development in Uganda depends on bold, collective action. Consultations with Women-Led, Women-Rights', and Refugee-Led Organizations have revealed persistent barriers such as corruption, bureaucracy, inequality between women and men, and vague localization frameworks. But they've also illuminated a clear path forward. Local actors are not just identifying problems, they're offering solutions: simplified funding, stronger governance, and clearer definitions to ensure aid reaches those who need it most. With targeted investments in capacity, transparency, and inclusive partnerships, Uganda has the potential to lead by example. If donors, INGOs, and governments commit to shifting power and resources to the grassroots, Uganda could become a global model for equitable, community-driven development, one that truly leaves no one behind.