devex
Do Good. Do It Well.

Opinion
Opinion: Localization

Solidarity, not reform, will guide what comes next for local leadership

Opinion: As the aid ecosystem faces seismic changes, international groups must recognize that local systems of solidarity already exist — and their right to support these systems must be earned.

*By **Hibak Kalfan** // 04 March 2026*

Women participate in a community meeting on reconstruction of their village. Photo by: Nugroho Nurdikiawan Sunjoyo / World Bank / CC BY-NC-ND

I have sat in too many meetings over the past decade where localization was spoken about as if it were inevitable. As if we were on a shared journey, moving steadily in the right direction. Commitments were made, language evolved, frameworks multiplied. And yet, when those meetings ended, the people I kept thinking about were not shaping the decisions being made.

They were the local and national leaders I speak with regularly — often late at night, sometimes quietly, usually under pressure. People who are navigating shrinking civic space, political interference, and constant uncertainty about funding. People carrying responsibility without authority, risk without protection, and expectations without trust.

ADVERTISEMENT

What they describe is not a system failing to understand change. It is a system struggling to let go.

I want to be honest about our own role in this. For years, many of us — including at NEAR — worked within the language of localization, stretching it as far as it would go to push for deeper reform. It created openings. It allowed us to question funding, behavior, and power from within.

But listening closely to local leaders over time, it has become clear that this framing can no longer hold the ambition that local leadership now demands. Not because the ambition was wrong, but because the realities local leaders navigate every day have outgrown what localization, in its current widely practised form, was ever designed to contain.

That realization is echoed across insights shared by local and national organizations through NEAR's recent research capturing global south civil society perspectives — a collective reflection on how aid functions in practice, and where authority continues to sit.

From localization to local leadership

What local and national organizations are doing every day goes far beyond what that language was designed to accommodate. They are leading responses shaped by their political, social, and cultural realities. They are negotiating with authorities, navigating restrictive environments, mobilizing domestic and diaspora resources, and sustaining action long after international attention moves on. This is leadership. It is not theoretical, and it is not waiting to be enabled.

In Sudan, emergency response rooms — local civil society networks — sustained crisis response efforts amid severe political instability and access constraints, even as international coordination structures struggled to adapt. Excluded from key funding channels and international system decision-making spaces, Sudanese organizations mobilized community networks, domestic solidarity, and diaspora funding to maintain frontline services.

This is what local leadership looks like in practice. It does not sit neatly inside projects or institutions. It lives in ecosystems.

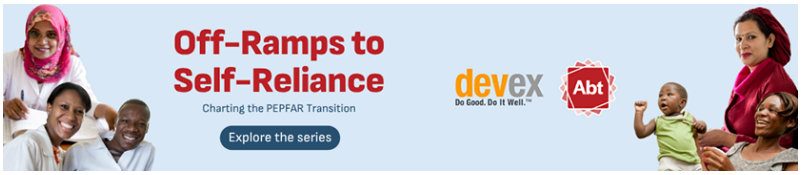
Across contexts, leadership is exercised through dense, relational networks — community groups, women-led and youth-led movements, informal responders, faith groups, local authorities, domestic funders, diaspora networks, and regional partners. But leadership is not about relationships alone. It is about what those relationships enable.

Authority, priority-setting, control over resources, and accountability to communities emerge through these networks, shaped by political realities and histories of trust and resistance. Local leadership is not about proximity alone, nor simply about representation within existing power structures. It is about whether power itself is rooted in and answerable to local constituencies.

These locally led ecosystems are messy, adaptive, and deeply political. They distribute risk, generate legitimacy, and sustain action over time. Yet they remain largely invisible to systems designed to control aid from a distance.

And they do not operate in isolation. They exist within a multipolar world marked by intersecting political, social, and economic systems. Locally led ecosystems navigate shifting geopolitical alignments, regional dynamics, alternative financing flows, south-south cooperation, and tightening national controls. Aid is only one part of this landscape — and often not the most decisive one.

ADVERTISEMENT



Take, for example, the Facility Aiding Locally-led Engagement, or FALE — a Pacific model of south-south collaboration. With national hubs across Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, and the Solomon Islands, FALE operates through a decentralized structure with volunteers across different islands. It convenes civil society, local government, and different ministries onto one platform, as equals. In 2025, FALE activated multistakeholder coordination in response to major cyclones — mobilizing rapidly without waiting for international direction.

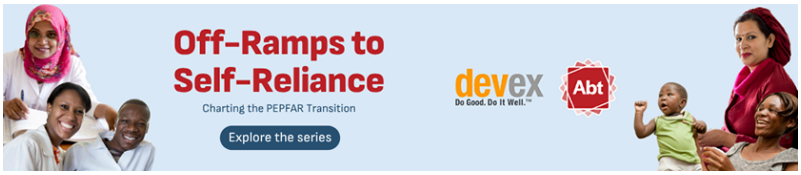
The aid system is no longer central to solidarity

Against this backdrop, the question is no longer whether the existing aid system can be incrementally improved or even whether a downsized version is sufficient. The question is whether it is willing to recognize that it is no longer the sole, or even primary, organizing force.

There are already examples of solidarity being practised differently — through community philanthropy, feminist funds, mutual aid networks, and locally rooted financing mechanisms that prioritize relationships, trust, and long-term presence over projects and compliance.

In the Philippines, a solidarity fund has helped a small farmers' group catalyze additional resources from the local government. In Bangladesh, organizations are working to assign value to nonmonetary assets that formal systems overlook. Across the global south, groups respond quietly to recurring crises in their own neighborhoods — ones that rarely make the headlines. These are not models to be replicated wholesale. They are signals of something deeper: That solidarity is being built through multiple systems, not one.

ADVERTISEMENT



This has uncomfortable implications for international groups that have long assumed a central role.

Donors, United Nations agencies, and INGOs still have a part to play. But that role cannot be assumed by default. It must be earned through

choices that genuinely strengthen local ecosystems — not fragment them, recentralize control, or extract value while calling it partnership. In a world of multiple systems, relevance depends on whether international aid and development groups are willing to follow rather than lead, to support rather than shape, and to share risk rather than transfer it.

Moving away from localization is not about abandoning reform. It is about recognizing that reform alone is insufficient. This is not about fixing a single system so that it works a little better. It is about investing in systems of solidarity that already exist, even when they do not look familiar or comfortable.

Local and national civil society are already doing this work, often at great personal and political cost. They are not waiting for permission. The real question is whether the international aid sector is prepared to stop centering itself — and to meet them where they already are.

Read more:

► Does the global south still want localization — or does it want more? (Pro)

► With USAID gone, do foundations still care about localization? (Pro)

► Between aid cuts and localization, what is the role of the INGO today? (Pro)

Humanitarian Aid | Democracy, Human Rights & Governance | Social/Inclusive Development

The views in this opinion piece do not necessarily reflect Devex's editorial views.

About the author

Hibak Kalfan

Hibak Kalfan is the executive director of NEAR, a global south-led network of local and national civil society organizations working to transform the aid system.