

Locally Led Development

Position and Practice



By **AKTION AMAZONAS**

in cooperation with partners of the South American Forest Conservation Alliance:

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FOREWORD:

This document is the outcome of an internal process within the South American Forest Conservation Alliance (SAFCA). It draws on discussions at our alliance workshop in Bolivia in 2025, where the global agenda of locally led development and what it means in our own contexts was debated. With this paper, SAFCA sets out its collective position: to contribute to the international debate while grounding our stance in the lived realities in Peru and Bolivia.



Photo: SAFCA's workshops, Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive.

DEFINITIONS:

For the purpose of this paper we aim to clarify the use of the term community. We refer to communities as groups of people living inside physical villages that can be either Indigenous, non-Indigenous or as we see sometimes: a mix. Therefore, when referring to communities, we do not include state/regional/municipal authorities, NGOs or other stakeholders.



Photo: Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive

BACKGROUND:

Concepts and how locally led development evolved

The idea of local ownership has shaped development thinking for decades. In the 1970s, participatory approaches began to challenge top-down models by positioning communities as active agents rather than passive recipients. Early community forestry policies, such as for instance in Nepal, further institutionalized community roles in natural resource governance. Through the 1980s and by the 1990s, these ideas had expanded into large-scale community-based development (CBD) programs, often promoted by major donors such as the World Bank. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit further cemented the idea that sustainable development required local participation, embedding community roles in Agenda 21 and influencing both environmental and development policy debates in the decades that followed. For community-based development the principle was simple, but ambitious: communities themselves should decide how resources are allocated and how development unfolds in their own contexts. In practice, these programs produced mixed results: in some cases, empowering communities to manage resources effectively, in others constrained by donor-driven designs and uneven outcomes.

In the 2000s, global aid frameworks formalized the concept of “ownership.” The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) established it as a cornerstone of development effectiveness, though largely defined at the level of national governments. In 2015, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals reaffirmed participation and local ownership as cross-cutting principles. The humanitarian sector went further with the Grand Bargain (2016), which pledged that 25% of humanitarian funding should go “as directly as possible”

to local and national responders. Yet progress has been slow, with most resources still flowing through international intermediaries.

Civil society sharpened the critique through the #ShiftThePower movement, launched by the Global Fund for Community Foundations at the 2016 Global Summit on Community Philanthropy and embraced from the outset by grassroots and community philanthropy networks worldwide. The movement reframed the debate: locally led development was not just about transferring money, but about transforming power relations, amplifying local voices, and recognizing diverse forms of knowledge. At the same time, debates on the decolonisation of development gained traction. Organizations such as Peace Direct and Adeso, together with GFCF, argued that colonial legacies still shape aid systems - from who sets priorities and defines “impact,” to whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are heard. *Decolonising aid* means dismantling these structures and ensuring development reflects diverse ways of knowing and leading. For international NGOs like ours, this carries a clear responsibility: not only urging donors to change their systems but also ensuring we do not replicate old imbalances ourselves. That requires humility, sharing space, and readiness to step back so that communities define both priorities and success. Reports such as *Time to Decolonise Aid* (2021) amplified this call, while climate policy introduced Locally Led Adaptation, with eight principles endorsed by over 120 institutions since 2021.

Across these agendas, many overlapping terms have been used: *community-based development, local ownership, localization, shift the power, decolonizing aid, local leadership, locally led development*. They differ in origin but share a common critique of donor-driven models. Importantly, “local” does not mean the same thing in each case: sometimes it refers to national governments, sometimes to local NGOs, and increasingly to Indigenous and community organizations.

For SAFCA, this layered reality is crucial. Locally led development exists on multiple levels, and progress at one level does not automatically translate into another. Both levels matter, but they are different and must be recognized as such. SAFCA’s position is therefore to strengthen them both, *while placing particular emphasis on advancing community leadership* – knowing that not all communities want, or need, to lead in the same way.

OUR POSITION:

Community leadership at the core of locally led development

For SAFCA, strong NGO partnerships create the foundation for systemic change. Yet the main emphasis of this paper is on community leadership – because we see this as the next frontier of locally led development, and the area where transformation is both most needed and most challenging. We believe community leadership is not an add-on, but the condition for meaningful, long-term change. When communities define priorities, initiatives are more relevant, equitable, and sustainable. At the same time, not all communities want, or are positioned, to lead every part of a project cycle. Locally led development must therefore respect diversity in how leadership is expressed, and support communities in ways that build power without imposing responsibility they do

not seek. This recognition is what leads us to emphasize that community preferences vary – and that respecting this variation is central to a genuinely locally led approach.



Photo: Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive

Community preferences vary – and that’s OK

While we believe that community leadership is central to meaningful and sustainable development, we also recognize an often-overlooked reality: **not all communities want to lead every part of the process** – and that is entirely legitimate.

Full ownership of development cycles all the way from needs assessment to impact measurement requires not only capacity, but time, trust, and most importantly: **interest**. Many communities prefer to focus their leadership on specific parts of a project: defining priorities, making key decisions, monitoring part of the progress, or managing selected components, while relying on trusted partners for technical or administrative support. This is not a failure of locally led development. It is **locally defined leadership in action**. Insisting on “full ownership” in every context risk replacing one rigid model with another and may pressure communities into roles they did not ask for. In doing so, we risk replicating the very North-South power dynamics we claim to challenge: imposing

a new ideal of community leadership under the banner of empowerment.

We must be careful not to push a predefined model of what local leadership **should** look like. Instead, we must remain attentive to what local leadership **does** look like. Even if it involves communities choosing to delegate administrative or technical responsibilities, while firmly retaining control over the priorities and values that matter most to them.



Photo: Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive

There are still few real-world examples of fully community-led development cycles, especially in structurally marginalized areas. However, some *nearly-there* examples actually exist in our intervention areas – Indigenous organizations whom we collaborate with. Rather than always idealizing full transfer of responsibility as the ultimate goal, we support **a spectrum of locally led development**, where the level of leadership is defined by each community and may evolve over time. This approach allows us to remain ambitious without being prescriptive in order to promote leadership while respecting diverse forms of agency.

The donor dilemma: power shift without system shift?

While it is positive that many donors in recent years have embraced the language of locally led development, in practice this shift is often pursued too quickly or under unrealistic expectations when referring to locally led development at community level. Local actors are sometimes handed responsibility without the time, resources, or structural space to carry it out meaningfully.

The rhetoric has evolved, but the systems largely have not. Communities are still expected to show leadership within frameworks designed far from their realities - in offices, through technical jargon, and shaped by Western logics of planning and measurement. Yet, local leadership cannot thrive in structures that do not speak its language. Logframes, indicators, and theories of change often clash with community conceptions of development rooted in land, relationships, identity, and long-term wellbeing.

Donors calling for more responsibility must therefore revise not only reporting procedures but the very tools, timelines, and definitions they impose. Expecting

communities to measure success through alien frameworks risks replacing one form of control with another. Locally led development becomes contradictory if communities must mimic donor language just to be heard.

Donors must make a choice: either transform their systems to fit locally defined realities or be more realistic about what can be transferred within project cycles. And when the degree of “local leadership” is assessed across the entire cycle, NGO’s applying for funds may feel compelled to overstate their practice just to meet expectations. In this way, responsibility pushed outward without systemic change risks creating pressure to *perform* local ownership rather than practice it - leading to a kind of *LLD-washing*, an equivalent of greenwashing.

OUR PRACTICE:

Grounding our position in experience

The South American Forest Conservation Alliance (SAFCA) is not new to the principles of locally led development. At NGO-level, our partnerships are formalized in partnership agreements and build on a set of common principles related to the agenda. At community level our model for locally led development is built on our experience with long-standing partnerships with local and Indigenous organizations, communities and individuals across Peru and Bolivia. Rather than delivering projects on behalf of communities, we support them in defining and defending their own priorities – from territorial governance and forest protection to climate adaptation and food sovereignty.



Photo: Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive

NGO-level practice

At the NGO-level, SAFCA's core principles are:

- **Equitable partnerships:** Collaboration is based on co-creation, locally identified needs, mutual value, and balanced power relations.
- **Shared decision-making and accountability:** Partners are accountable to each other, and leadership is not monopolized by Northern actors.
- **Capacity and visibility strengthened:** Local partners have access to networks, policy fora, and resources to act as credible leaders in their own contexts.
- **Institutional support and flexibility:** Budgets support long-term capacity and adaptive management, not just fixed activities, and adjust to shifting realities.
- **Trust and transparency:** Honest conversations about power, reporting, and responsibilities are the foundation of our collaboration.

Community-level practice: assisted locally led development

At the community level, our role is to support processes that strengthen agency over time. We call this “**assisted locally led development**”: a phase in which outside support helps communities move toward full control, at their own pace and according to their own interest. Some of our Indigenous partners already take leadership in almost every part of a project cycle in *some projects* they are part of – from design and planning to financial management and advocacy. Others take leadership in some part of the project

cycle and for most, the journey has just started and they as a result require sustained support.

Supporting communities through the **project cycle** means:

- **Design:** Where possible, assemblies and reflection spaces are organized at the outset of a project - and always throughout implementation - allowing flexibility and adjustments along the way. This ongoing dialogue means projects already reflect local priorities before they are formalized. When time frames do not allow for a dedicated meeting beforehand, our constant presence in villages through field officers keeps us closely aligned with community agendas.
- **Implementation:** We build technical, organizational, and political capacity - from forest monitoring and climate adaptation practices to financial literacy in non-timber forest product cooperatives and training in community governance. Our support introduces elements of leadership (such as bookkeeping skills in producer associations) while leaving communities in charge of core decisions.
- **Monitoring:** Communities track what is feasible within donor frameworks (such as household income in currency, or volumes of NTFPs harvested). At the same time, we strengthen ownership by continuously integrating more relevant local indicators such as local perceptions collected through interviews, focus groups, and feedback processes. This dual approach ensures donors receive the required data, while communities also monitor change in ways that matter to them.

- **Evaluation:** We promote participatory and qualitative methods such as collective reflections, testimonies, storytelling, Most Significant Change workshops etc. These approaches – as with monitoring – complement donor-driven indicators and ensure results are judged through both local and external perspectives.
- **Learning and adaptation:** We facilitate spaces for communities to analyze progress, revitalize traditional structures, and set their own direction for future work. Flexibility is key: community decisions may shift, and project cycles must adapt accordingly.

We aim at adapting project cycles around community rhythms, not donor calendars. We provide capacity, space, tools and connections that communities can choose to use, adapt, or reject. We are not leaders, we are allies, walking alongside communities as they strengthen their own leadership



Photo: Aktion Amazonas Photo Archive

FINAL STATEMENT: OUR COMMITMENT

For SAFCA, locally led development in Peru and Bolivia must ultimately mean community-led development, embedded within broader structures of local, national, and international solidarity. Our practice is grounded in equitable partnerships at the NGO level, and in patient, long-term support for Indigenous and local communities as they take the lead in defending forests, cultures, and futures. We recognize that this transformation takes time and will look different across contexts, but our role is clear: not to lead on behalf of communities, but to stand alongside them. We commit to sustaining this role – supporting community agency, amplifying local voices, and adapting our own practices – for as long as communities wish to partner with us.



Locally Led Development, November 2025

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