

Locally owned. Globally backed.

A Manifesto for Locally Led Action

Despite various efforts undertaken by actors in the international cooperation landscape to strengthen locally led action (LLA), there are still barriers to overcome within and outside the individual organizations on the pathway to the desired change. This manifesto¹ is a joint initiative by Swiss NGOs and other organizations active in international cooperation to face up to the sometimes uncomfortable questions and tackle structural changes to facilitate locally led action.

Not business as usual - the turning point for international cooperation

We, Swiss non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active in international cooperation, partner with local actors in our projects and programmes. We recognize the valuable potential and positive impact of cooperation between Swiss NGOs and local partners. These partnerships are essential for meaningful development and humanitarian efforts. At the same time, we remain aware that such cooperation does not exist in a vacuum - it is influenced by underlying power imbalances rooted in colonial and historically oppressive structures. These dynamics can limit true equitable partnerships and hinder sustainable, long-term development. Acknowledging this tension is essential to building more just and effective collaborations.

We, Swiss NGOs, firmly believe that local actors must take the lead in international cooperation to ensure that actions are just, effective, and sustainable. Local leadership not only ensures greater relevance and accountability but also strengthens the resilience of communities in the face of mounting global challenges to achieving self-determined and sustainable impact.

Today, this approach is more urgent than ever. In a context marked by political backlash against the assertion of fundamental rights, by shrinking civic space, and declining commitment to multilateralism, we are not witnessing a temporary disruption, we are at a turning point. The fundamental principles that have long underpinned international cooperation – openness, shared responsibility, and dialogue – are being eroded. The sector must urgently adapt to this new reality and reaffirm its commitment to locally led, rights-based, and inclusive development. Central to this is that Swiss NGOs, local actors, and the communities see themselves as allies in contributing to the fulfilment of human rights and ensuring that people can live in dignity grounded in more equitable power relations. A human rights-based approach in international cooperation is therefore essential for ensuring locally led action.

¹ The manifesto was elaborated by Swiss NGOs and was the subject of consultations with local actors as well as donor organizations.

We define locally led action as initiatives owned and led by people, organizations and institutions in their own context. This includes initiatives that are led by government bodies, civil society², the private sector, academia and community-based organizations as well as local authorities.

Concrete actions

We, as Swiss NGOs, are aware of the need to revise our existing roles and are committed to dismantling the structural power imbalances that hinder truly equal partnerships. For this reason, we strive for the following:

Eliminating power imbalances

- Swiss NGOs tackle power imbalances that hinder equal partnerships and sustainability, starting with dismantling structural racism and advancing gender equality through an intersectional approach in our own minds and organizations. We jointly reflect on how to overcome existing power imbalances and take action: Who makes decisions? Whose voices are heard? Who defines the expertise needed?
- We acknowledge that LLA is not just about programmes, but also about each and every one in an organization: from human resources to management, communications and fundraising.
- We consistently apply ethical standards in our communication and fundraising, avoiding any paternalistic messaging based on stereotypes.

Ensuring local ownership

- Swiss NGOs include their partners in all relevant decision-making processes and give support only when requested and needed.
- We accompany local actors with strategic, organizational, and financial support, enabling them to thrive as actors in their own right.
- We ensure that feedback mechanisms are in place at all levels.
- We advocate for donor policies and framework conditions that allow and promote locally led action.
- Together with local actors, we promote consistent dialogue with local authorities and line ministries to ensure the sustainability and scalability of joint initiatives.
- We acknowledge that national and local governments are responsible for upholding human rights and providing basic services. Swiss NGO interventions should not replace or delay essential governance dialogues between citizens and the State.

Building equitable partnerships

- Swiss NGOs invest in long-term partnerships, nurturing a culture of mutual accountability with our partners, including regular partnership reviews and assessments.

² Our understanding of civil society is in line with that of the [Istanbul Principles](#).

- We jointly define our roles in ways that promote fair and equitable partnerships.
- We acknowledge that capacity-strengthening should not be unidirectional, but mutual. We prioritize co-creation and joint learning approaches in our collaboration with local partners, recognizing indigenous and local knowledge systems as essential sources of expertise.
- We take our share of financial, reputational and security risks to protect and empower our partners. At the same time, we commit to a fair and transparent sharing of resources.
- When direct implementation is unavoidable, Swiss NGOs commit to taking all possible measures to ensure meaningful participation of local communities and concerned populations in decision-making and implementation.
- Swiss NGOs create spaces for critical exchange and awareness-raising on local ownership, power dynamics, and new ways of working with their partners.
- We ensure that our partners have direct access to our senior leadership to engage in strategic decision-making on an equal footing.

Ensuring quality financing

- Swiss NGOs prioritize long-term funding to strengthen partners.
- We cover overhead costs of local actors and engage in core funding, where it is in our own hands. Where it is not, we make representations to donor organizations to ensure that they adapt their funding modalities.
- We direct resources towards impactful actions and provide flexible reporting models to alleviate bureaucratic burdens. Where it is not in our own hands, we advocate for it.
- Swiss NGOs improve local actors' access to donors and step back if it serves the cause.
- Swiss NGOs support South-South cooperation.

Protecting civic space

- We champion human rights, justice, and the protection of human rights defenders.
- Swiss NGOs invest in building trust and networks among national and international CSOs, NGOs, and donors for better coordination and joint advocacy.
- Swiss NGOs support the implementation of public policies protecting civic space, such as the OECD DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society.
- We encourage consistent dialogue between local CSOs, partners and the government, at the local level or through line ministries, to define inclusive and sustainable public policies.

Which roles do Swiss NGOs see for themselves in LLA

The following section brings to life the broad range of roles Swiss NGOs play – each shaped by unique missions, values, and priorities.

Building bridges for lasting impact

- **Connecting & empowering:** Swiss NGOs support collaboration across civil society and facilitate strong local, national, and regional networks to increase impact.
- **Convening stakeholders:** As INGOs, we leverage our networks to bring together governments, the private sector, academia, and donors to foster dialogue to amplify impact.

- **Enhancing representation and inclusion:** We use inclusive, rights-based approaches to involve marginalized and vulnerable groups in a meaningful way.
- **Building each other's capacities:** We engage in mutual learning processes and co-create effective, innovative solutions by joining forces.

Boosting smart and flexible funding

- **Enhancing flexibility:** Swiss NGOs offer flexible funding that allows partners to invest in institutional development, innovation and the strengthening of key capacities.
- **Navigating bureaucracy & resources:** Swiss NGOs facilitate local CSOs' access to funding and the management of comprehensive administrative processes.
- **Increasing outreach:** Swiss NGOs increase outreach and maximise development impact by multiplying public funds through additional private contributions.
- **Tailored contribution:** We adapt funding to each partner's absorption capacity, ensuring sustainable and context-specific financial contributions.

Investing in sustainable partnerships

- **Long-term partnerships:** Swiss NGOs build trust-based, enduring collaborations with local actors, reinforced by flexible funding and shared values.
- **Staying engaged:** With the ability to operate where government agencies cannot, Swiss NGOs provide vital support in fragile and politically complex environments.
- **Diverse partnerships:** We collaborate with local actors, enriching and influencing public policy dialogues and informing national strategies.

Acting as advocator and influencer

- **Raising awareness:** Leveraging their contextual expertise, Swiss NGOs highlight the necessity of locally led action within their networks.
- **Policy dialogue:** We engage in development policy dialogues with decision-makers to strengthen evidence-based and effective policies.
- **Joint advocacy:** We conduct joint advocacy work at national and international levels for fairer political and economic structures, notably in Switzerland, where we are based.
- **Civic space:** We promote an inclusive and independent civil society, advocate for government accountability, and support public participation and a free press.

Taking risks and fostering innovation

- **Encouraging experimentation:** Swiss NGOs foster innovation by supporting pilot projects and sharing risks with local partners to challenge conventional approaches.
- **Efficient solutions:** Together with communities, public and private local stakeholders, we develop a complementary and comprehensive understanding of contexts and develop and design responsive strategies and solutions.
- **Risk mitigation:** We support local actors in navigating risks such as shrinking civic space and limited resources, ensuring resilience and safety in challenging environments.

Sensitising for global responsibility

- **Global responsibility:** We raise awareness about Switzerland's role in global inequalities and the need for shared responsibility.
- **Support and resources:** Swiss NGOs mobilize support and resources in the Global North for issues in the Global South.

Call for coordinated action

As Swiss NGOs step up their commitment to rebalancing international cooperation by adapting practices, mobilising resources, and engaging key stakeholders, we also rely on donors to create the right enabling conditions. We therefore call on donors to align their funding and partnership practices with this shift in approach:

- **Foster flexibility for impact:** We encourage donors to adopt more flexible, trust-based approaches that recognize the capacity of local actors and the expertise of Swiss NGOs. By loosening rigid reporting requirements and embracing adaptive and pool-funding models, we can empower local communities to drive change while maintaining transparency and accountability.
- **Support effective, equitable partnerships:** Supporting the effective engagement of local actors can enhance the impact and sustainability of development efforts. Swiss NGOs are experts in facilitating partnerships, ensuring that resources and expertise are channelled where they can make the most difference. Together, let us focus on enabling these collaborations with greater trust and less top-down control.

A strong civil society is and will always be the backbone of any functioning democracy. Today, its role is more vital than ever. Civil society organizations, local authorities, ministries, and the private sector each have complementary roles and bring distinct strengths. Only by working together can we shape a just and sustainable future. The time to act is now.