

Locally-led sustainable development: Insights and recommendations from GLA partners



**Green
Livelihoods
Alliance**

FORESTS FOR A JUST FUTURE

A new report brings together reflections from 39 civil society organisations across 11 tropical countries, turning abstract concepts about locally-led sustainable development into insights and recommendations, rooted in the daily practice of those who work with Indigenous Peoples and local communities to protect forests and sustain livelihoods.

Local knowledge as a foundation

In recent years, international conservation and development efforts have increasingly focused on empowering local communities to lead their own development trajectories. But to move the idea of “locally-led sustainable development” from an abstract ambition to something real, we need to learn from the organisations working in the field every day, and create space for them to exchange experiences for mutual learning.

The Green Livelihoods Alliance ([GLA](#)), set out to do just that. GLA partners across the alliance jointly engaged in a learning trajectory to reflect on what it takes to advance locally led sustainable development. Through a series of workshops and online exchanges, 39 civil society organisations from 11 countries shared experiences, questioned assumptions and learned from one another. Tropenbos International ([TBI](#)) and the IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands ([IUCN NL](#)) designed and facilitated this collective process.

They all agreed on one thing: when projects fail to reflect what local people value, outcomes rarely last. Listening first is therefore essential. It helps organisations understand the perceptions and priorities of the Indigenous Peoples and local communities they work with. It also allows them to build on local strengths, respond to real needs and form partnerships that endure.

This takes time, flexibility and humility. It means adapting to local rhythms, languages and social structures, and creating space for marginalised groups to lead. Above all, it starts with dialogue and recognising local knowledge and wisdom.



Key insights and recommendations



The findings of the learning trajectory are now captured in **Locally-Led Sustainable Development: Insights and Recommendations from GLA Partners**. The report distils seven insights with recommendations:

1

Value local knowledge and wisdom:

Local knowledge, rooted in generations of lived experience, is foundational, like roots to a tree. It shapes values, practices, and customs across all phases of locally-led initiatives.

- Recognise Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LCs) as the true experts; adapt your methods to learn from them.
- Respect the diverse forms in which knowledge is expressed.
- Integrate Indigenous and local knowledge into project design, indicators, and reporting.

2

Prioritise basic needs and secure livelihoods

Basic needs and secure livelihoods are not a luxury, they are the soil without which nothing can grow. Without them, long-term goals like forest protection remain out of reach.

- Prioritise urgent needs like food, shelter, and safety while introducing sustainability frameworks.
- Support initiatives that emerge from within the community, especially for marginalised groups.
- Leave room for immediate needs and urgencies.

3

Advance inclusion through practice

True growth means moving in step with communities, honoring local customs, and uplifting marginalised voices such as women, youth, and elders.

- Adapt to the lived experience of marginalised groups.
- Recognise that participation and inclusivity may differ from mainstream practices.
- Allow for an ample time frame needed for a thorough process.

4

Context matters, no one-size-fits-all

Locally-led approaches must reflect unique ecological, cultural, and social conditions – and be adaptable as these conditions change over time.

- Support IP&LCs in creating their own methodologies, tools, processes, and indicators that reflect their own unique context and values.
- Treat locally-led initiatives as living systems that can evolve with time, shifting conditions, and community needs.

5

CSOs can act as bridges

CSOs can connect IP&LCs with external actors, amplifying voices and protecting space for self-determination.

- Increase awareness on rights, and link to international law.
- Support community-decision making, ensuring space and time for dialogue.
- Ensure safety and security for both CSO staff and communities.
- Promote fair and transparent consultation processes.
- Safeguard land and cultural rights in alignment with legal frameworks (e.g. UNDRIP).

6

Strengthen collective voice

Like a forest canopy, strong networks foster resilience and influence.

- Support trusted local leaders -especially women and youth- to build (intergenerational) networks.
- Facilitate inter-community exchanges and dialogues that deepen solidarity and shared strategies.
- Create spaces for communities to collectively advocate and negotiate with external actors. Invest in long-term support for network building.

7

Rethink funding mechanisms

Shifts in funding structures are essential for moving forward with locally-led sustainable development.

- Invest in long-term flexible funding
- Simplify access to resources for local actors
- Align funding with community priorities



Photo: Woman arranging nursery bags © A Rocha Ghana

Turning insights into practice



These insights carry real weight because they were shaped collectively, across countries and contexts, by organisations that work daily with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. They offer something practical and usable for CSOs and donors alike, showing what it takes to support local leadership in a way that lasts..

Turning these into practice requires a shift in how project interventions are organised. Project cycles, methods and processes need to match local realities, and reflect local priorities. Donors need to offer long-term, flexible support. And the sector as a whole must rethink how decisions are made, how success is measured and how partnerships are built. The focus must move from control and short-term outputs to collaboration and mutual trust. Only then can we help restore agency to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, so they can make decisions that support their livelihoods and the long-term health of their landscapes. Thus contributing to healthy forests that support global efforts to combat climate change and halt biodiversity loss.

The learning trajectory was organised as part of the Forests for a Just Future programme of the Green Livelihoods Alliance, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Read the full report here:
[Report: Locally-led sustainable development | IUCN NL](#)



For more information on the report, please contact:

- Femke Schouten (femke.schouten@iucn.nl)
- André Brasser (learning@tropenbos.org)