



**SUPPORTING DANISH CIVIL SOCIETY
ACTORS TO BETTER ENABLE LOCAL
LEADERSHIP
2023 – 2024**

LEARNING NOTE

I. Introduction

In 2022, Conducive Space for Peace (CSP) convened, designed and delivered a series of three workshops with Danish civil society focused on local leadership and equitable partnerships. Based on the success of these events and in response to participants' requests for additional support, CSP, with support from Globalt Fokus, convened the **2023-2024 Danish Civil Society Actors to Better Enable Local Leadership learning series**.

The series included three full-day workshops and four shorter learning events, which were attended by a range of professionals in different roles within Danish NGOs, all of whom have engaged with the local leadership agenda either directly or indirectly.¹ The scope and focus of the workshops and learning events were co-defined in consultation with participating groups.

This note summarises the key learning drawn from the discussions and exchanges that took place throughout the series. It highlights challenges and opportunities participants have faced in taking forward the local leadership agenda and briefly considers the state of local leadership efforts in Denmark.

Danish Civil Society Actors to Better Enable Local Leadership 2023-2024 Learning Series		
Event	Date	Thematic focus
Workshop 1	22/06/2023	Applying MEL Practices to Advance Local Leadership and Equitable Partnerships
Workshop 2	13/10/2023	Building Blocks of Change for Enabling Local Leadership within Complex Organisational Settings
Workshop 3	24/01/2024	Peer-to-Peer Learning from Denmark on Localisation Strategies
Learning Event 1	23/06/2023	Innovative Practices in Changing the International System - Challenges and Opportunities
Learning Event 2	18/01/2024	Learning from Promoting Local Leadership in the Humanitarian Sector
Learning Event 3	25/01/2024	Whole of Organisation Approach: Role of Support Functions in Promoting Local Leadership
Learning Event 4	30/01/2024	Moving the Needle from Within: Harnessing Leadership Potential of Individuals Promoting Local Leadership

¹ One workshop and three learning events were convened in January 2024 due to time constraints in the last quarter of 2023.

II. Context

Globally, there is a growing recognition of the need for localised approaches to peacebuilding, emphasising the pivotal role of national and local actors in driving sustainable change. This shift is accompanied by increasing calls to transform the global aid system to address power imbalances and ensure more equitable and effective partnerships.

In the Danish context, there is an emphasis on localisation and local leadership, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) expressing a strong desire to be one of the frontrunners of this agenda globally. In line with this ambition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has required organisations to demonstrate a localisation strategy to qualify for DANIDA Strategic Partnerships (SPA) funding with requirements on the portion of funding allocated to partners. The new Danish Development Strategy also places significant emphasis on local leadership, recognising local actors' pivotal role in achieving humanitarian, development and peacebuilding outcomes. While many civil society actors in Denmark welcome efforts to engage local actors as equal partners, they are also cognizant of the concerted effort required to truly transform the current inequities and lead to significant change.

III. Key Learning

The workshops and learning events in this series brought together key Danish civil society actors to reflect on strategies to advance local leadership and equitable partnerships within their organisations and spheres of influence. There was widespread recognition amongst participants of the pressing need to address the unequal power dynamics that dominate the current aid system, structural barriers and a prevailing aversion towards risk that hinders change. The challenges below were identified by participants as barriers hindering meaningful transformation and well-intended change. While the obstacles are significant, participants also highlighted promising practices that are helping to 'move the needle' along with recommendations on individual and collective actions that can be taken to help support Danish civil society actors to better enable local leadership.

7 Challenges

- **Definition Confusion:** Lack of consensus on definitions and scope of localisation and local leadership creates implementation challenges.
- **Inflexible Donor Requirements:** Tension between the need to fulfil time-consuming reporting, donor requirements and the desire to prioritise local leadership.
- **Risk Aversion:** A preference amongst many NGOs to manage risk by developing and maintaining control over processes, decisions and outcomes with local partners as opposed to absorbing more risks.
- **Lack of Urgency:** Acknowledgement of the need for change but structural incentives and willingness to commit to transformative change at the required scale and pace is lagging.
- **Pockets of Resistance to Change:** Hesitation caused by perceived capacity limitations at the local level and the possibility of change efforts slowing down the delivery of programmes.

- **'Greenwashing':** Like companies or organisations that falsely claim to be environmentally friendly, efforts are labelled as 'localisation' without bringing genuine change or addressing the inherent power imbalances.
- **Organisational Set-up:** Change is driven by individuals navigating an organisational context and administrative system that is not adequately set up to promote local leadership at the scale it desires.

7 Opportunities:

- **Strategic Navigation:** Continue to utilise shared and safe spaces to engage in honest conversations with Danish and international actors to set joint priorities, coordinate efforts and navigate the intricacies of the local leadership agenda.
- **Partnership Models:** Reconfigure partnerships through new partnership strategies to include effective two-way feedback mechanisms.
- **Reduce Administrative Burden:** Collaborate with other NGOs and donors to minimise duplicative administrative requirements (procurement requirements, due diligences processes, reporting etc.)
- **Capacity Building and Advocacy:** Focus on institutional capacity strengthening identified by partners and support their advocacy efforts.
- **Advocacy:** Leverage relationships and access to donors to advocate for proposal development timelines that support early involvement of local and national actors and more flexible donor requirements on behalf of partners.
- **Solidarity:** Connect individuals working to advance local leadership within their organisations to foster continued energy towards advancing local leadership and the exchange of ideas and practice.
- **Continuous Reflection:** Engage in regular critical self-reflection to address discrepancies between stated values and actual actions and adapt and improve approaches to better support local leadership and equitable partnerships.

IV. Our Learning

As both convenors and mutual learning participants in this learning series, CSP gained insights and an appreciation of the ongoing organisational efforts, to deepen our dialogue and actions in supporting the local leadership agenda in Denmark.

Understanding the audience – Among Danish civil society actors, there are two groups of audiences, both interested in engaging in promoting 'localisation' and related themes. The first is motivated by a belief that transferring power to the 'local' is both a practical and values-based imperative that requires INGOs and other actors in the system to assess their existing ways of working. The second group share some of this thinking while also predominately motivated by the proposition that transferring power to local leadership will lead to a more effective and efficient aid system. It is critical to work with both groups to continue to build and sustain the

momentum for change and to cater learning events and accompaniment processes to reflect their unique positions and motivations. Moving forward, CSP envisions collaborating with both groups, meeting them where they are, and convening spaces to promote honest and open sharing.

Say what others can't – The participants in the workshop series recognised the importance of the safe space this work provided, where they could freely share their learning and dilemmas and discuss common concerns regarding their respective local leadership approaches. The extent to which participants felt comfortable sharing varied depending on multiple factors, including their funding sources. Unlike many organisations bound by donor expectations, CSP is able to propose relatively disruptive ideas to provoke discussions and communicate messages that others may hesitate to openly share. This gives us a unique role in connecting these messages to broader discussions on local leadership and decolonising aid.

Take time to build legitimacy and establish trust – The 2022 and 2023 workshop series helped CSP to generate and build on the momentum for change among Danish civil society and deepen our understanding of the Danish operational context, including the challenges and opportunities for groups seeking to enable locally led peacebuilding. The series helped us to reinvigorate existing relationships, test some of our approaches and assumptions, learn from the Danish civil society of their unique challenges and opportunities and, with invaluable insights from participants, develop a criterion for understanding organisations' 'readiness' for transformation. In the coming year, CSP plans to shift away from convening learning events as a primary method of sharing information and facilitating dialogue, opting instead to work more closely with individual organisations that have requested support to implement internal change processes.

V. Integrating Learning

The workshops in 2022 and 2023 saw significant engagement from Danish civil society. Participants appreciated the safe space to voice concerns and share learning. The workshops facilitated honest and open discussions, and the presence of guest speakers and international colleagues added valuable perspectives.

Moving forward, CSP plans to explore alternative engagement methods beyond workshops to support Danish civil society actors to better enable local leadership, focusing on an accompaniment approach to support organisations in implementing internal change processes. In consideration of the group's emphasis on the value of critical reflection, CSP is committing itself to strengthening its internal practice and has identified a team member to lead this process.