



Local leadership, agency and voice (LLAV)

Position, approach and practice





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COVER:

With CAFOD partner UBINIG, farmers in Bangladesh are adopting sustainable farming practices and adapting to climate change.

Credit: Amit Rudro

INSIDE COVER:

CAFOD partner ASUVI is supporting resilience among female indigenous farmers in Quiche, Guatemala

Credit: Paz Redondo Cuesta

1. CAFOD'S POSITION ON LOCAL LEADERSHIP, AGENCY AND VOICE

1.1 Background and sector context

'Localisation' has been on the agenda of humanitarian and development discussions in the aid sector for several years, yet progress remains constrained by structural inequalities shaped by colonial legacies. International organisations and institutions based largely in the Global North continue to hold disproportionate decision-making power and control over resources, while communities and organisations closest to crises are too often positioned as implementers rather than leaders.

The Grand Bargain, launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, sought to address this imbalance, including through a commitment to channel at least 25% of global humanitarian funding "as directly as possible" to local and national actors. Despite repeated reaffirmations, this commitment has not yet been met, and progress has been uneven and fragile.

At the same time, the aid environment has become more complex. Rising humanitarian needs coincide with shrinking resources, heightened risk aversion, political polarisation and declining public confidence in aid systems. Humanitarian and development actors speak of a 'humanitarian reset' and 'the end of aid' as stakeholders increasingly recognise that delivery-heavy, INGO-centred models are neither financially nor politically sustainable, and as the lobby for demonstrable value for money grows. These pressures are reshaping debates about localisation, shifting them from a conversation about moral commitment to questions of necessity, system design and comparative advantage.

Within this context, localisation is no longer framed solely as a long-term aspiration, but as a practical response to constrained funding, access limitations, and the need for sustained on-the-ground presence. At the same time, there is a risk that localisation will become a cost-saving measure, without the accompanying shifts in power, accountability and risk-sharing required to enable genuine local leadership. CAFOD situates its approach to Local Leadership, Agency and Voice within this changing landscape, recognising the urgency of system reform, while resisting reductive interpretations that equate localisation with withdrawal of support and solidarity.

CAFOD, as a partnership organisation, is committed to actively confronting these systemic inequalities, biases and power imbalances alongside local partners and like-minded organisations. CAFOD's ten-year strategic framework, *Our Common Home*, reaffirms our commitment to support and enable people, communities and local partners to be artisans of their own destiny. The strategy explicitly emphasises the need to strengthen locally-led capacity, amplify local voices where appropriate, promote direct access to institutional funding, and remove barriers to participation in coordination and decision-making spaces.

In placing local leadership, agency and voice at the centre of our work, CAFOD aims to contribute to systemic change in the aid sector by creating an enabling environment in which communities and the organisations that represent them can lead sustainable change from within, while simultaneously generating evidence and learning that can influence others to do the same.



CAFOD partner Caritas Isiolo celebrating the completion of a solar-panelled water borehole in Isiolo, Kenya

Credit: Caritas Isiolo

1.2 Why Local Leadership, Agency and Voice matters: Justice, Effectiveness and Quality

Sharing power with local actors is intrinsic to CAFOD's partnership approach. Our commitment to genuine, equitable partnerships is rooted in the principles of human dignity and subsidiarity as laid out in Catholic Social Teaching, as well as in the Caritas Confederation's concept of 'Fraternal Cooperation'. Translated into sector-wide practice, these principles align closely with the desire for greater risk and power sharing, stronger accountability and participation, and enhanced respect for local knowledge.

From a justice perspective, promoting local leadership, agency and voice is central to addressing the root causes of inequality within the aid system. Unequal power relations shape not only who receives funding, but who defines needs, determines acceptable risk, sets programme priorities and occupies policy and decision-making spaces. Shifting leadership closer to affected communities is therefore a necessary step in challenging historical and ongoing imbalances that continue to influence humanitarian and development practice.

From the viewpoint of effectiveness, the association between locally-led action and improved relevance, timeliness and sustainability is well-documented. Local organisations draw on long-standing relationships, contextual knowledge and community goodwill to adapt rapidly to changing conditions. Because they are rooted in the community, they are able to maintain continuity through crises, and design responses that respond to the expressed needs and priorities of the people. This, in turn, enables more coherent approaches across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus.

Local leadership, agency and voice is also integral to programme quality and accountability. The 2024 update of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) places renewed emphasis on the leadership role of communities and affected people in shaping assistance. CAFOD's certification against the CHS reinforces our commitment to people-centred, accountable and participatory approaches, and provides a common framework for translating LLAV principles into practice.

1.3 CAFOD's vision for Local Leadership, Agency and Voice

CAFOD understands 'local leadership' as the exercise of decision-making power and stewardship by organisations and communities closest to the context, including needs assessments, programme design and delivery, learning, and influencing. 'Agency' refers to the ability of local actors and community members to self-determine priorities, make decisions and act upon them. 'Voice' refers to the opportunity and means to be heard with influence in the spaces where policies, funding and practice are shaped.

CAFOD seeks to enable and promote greater local leadership, agency and voice across our partners' work in communities, in our advocacy and campaigning, and in our organisational practice. The role of CAFOD staff and volunteers is to support the vision and priorities of local actors, rather than speak for them. We root programmes within the specific contexts of the communities they serve, tailoring interventions to diverse needs, and honouring the expertise, insights and aspirations of those directly affected.

CAFOD aims to amplify the voice and influence of partners in decision-making and coordination spaces, both within CAFOD and externally, and to facilitate partners' direct access to multi-year and flexible institutional funding. Local leadership is embedded within country core programmes as a strategic outcome area, and is reflected in CAFOD's organisational processes, performance framework and ways of working.

Local leadership goes beyond participation in projects. It includes leadership over resources, organisational and institutional resilience, collective action through networks and alliances, and influence over the systems and narratives that affect people's lives.



Defending indigenous women's rights in the Peruvian Amazon with CAFOD partner CAAAP

Credit CAAAP

2. CAFOD'S APPROACH TO ENABLING LOCAL LEADERSHIP, AGENCY AND VOICE

CAFOD's partner Caritas and Development Office Monrovia are supporting fishing families in Liberia to improve their employment opportunities and access to food

Credit: Thom Flint



2.1 Partnership principles and ways of working.

Partnership is central to CAFOD's identity, values and mission, and underpins how we advance local leadership, agency and voice. CAFOD understands partnership as accompaniment: a long-term, relational and evolving engagement in which roles and responsibilities adapt as partners' leadership, capacity and confidence grow. We work with a diverse range of partners, including Church agencies, national and local NGOs, networks, social movements and grassroots organisations, and recognise that CAFOD achieves its goals through their expertise, legitimacy and leadership.

Guiding partnership principles: CAFOD's partnership approach is guided by a set of interlinked principles: shared objectives, mutual accountability, equitable relationships, subsidiarity and participation, partner-led capacity strengthening, and innovation. These principles are articulated in CAFOD's partnership guidance, and shape how we work with more than 300 partners globally. Decision-making within partnerships is intentionally shared, and risk is understood as a joint responsibility to be managed collectively rather than transferred unilaterally.

Subsidiarity, shared power and accountability: Subsidiarity and shared power are central to CAFOD's approach to partnership. Decisions are taken as close as possible to the people affected, with local actors, organisations and communities exercising leadership over priorities, resources and strategies. CAFOD seeks to shift power within partnerships, moving decision-making as close to the grassroots as possible, while maintaining shared accountability for quality, safeguarding and outcomes.

Funding and partner-led capacity strengthening: Quality and flexible funding is a critical enabler of effective partnership and local leadership. Predictable,

CAFOD partners are helping to provide emergency water and toilets to vulnerable communities in Sudan.

Credit: George Wambugu



multi-year and flexible funding, including coverage of core and indirect costs, supports organisational sustainability and enables partners to invest in leadership, systems and institutional resilience. Capacity strengthening is understood as a partner-owned organisational change process, embedded within long-term partnerships and focused on governance, leadership and sustainability rather than narrow project compliance.

Voice, influence and collective action: Partnership extends beyond programme delivery to voice, influence and collective action. CAFOD supports partners, and where appropriate community representatives, to lead advocacy and engagement in policy and coordination spaces, individually and through networks and alliances. CAFOD seeks to amplify the voices of local people rather than speak on their behalf, except where access or protection considerations make this necessary.

Partnership as a learning relationship: CAFOD approaches partnership as a learning relationship, reflecting critically on its own power, roles and behaviours. Using evidence, partner feedback and learning processes, CAFOD adapts how it supports local leadership over time. Together with partners, we explore how roles, operating models, ways of working and competencies can evolve, with the aim that partner organisations and community structures are increasingly able to respond independently and effectively to the complex needs of their communities.

CAFOD is continuing to adapt its partnership operating models and processes to better enable local leadership, including through shared accountability for outcomes, partner-led decision-making, and partnership agreements tailored to partners' capacities and aspirations.

2.2 Three interlinked outcome areas

CAFOD's approach to Local Leadership, Agency and Voice (LLAV) recognises that leadership and agency reside at multiple levels: within communities themselves, within grassroots and civil society organisations, and within national and regional institutions. While most of CAFOD's work is delivered through partner organisations, our understanding of local leadership extends beyond organisational partnerships to include the agency and voice of people and communities directly affected by poverty, injustice and crisis. In line with this understanding, CAFOD's approach to enabling LLAV is articulated through three

interlinked outcome areas, which are embedded within CAFOD's organisational performance framework, and are overseen by senior management and trustees:

1. Strengthened organisational capacity of partners

CAFOD seeks to strengthen the long-term organisational health and sustainability of local and national partners, beyond immediate project delivery. This includes improving the quality of funding through multi-year agreements and non-project grants such as core support, asset and capacity-strengthening grants. CAFOD shares 50% of Indirect Cost Recovery received from institutional funding with partners, proportional to their programme budgets.

CAFOD also supports partners to access direct institutional funding, particularly in middle-income contexts. This is done through joint opportunity tracking, partner pre-positioning, and proposal development support. Organisational strengthening is understood as a partner-owned change process, supported through flexible funding, accompaniment and peer exchange, and aligned with partners' own priorities and strategies.

2. Enhanced local agency and voice in influencing

CAFOD facilitates access for partners and community members to decision-making spaces at local, national, regional and international levels, including UN processes, donor dialogues and national policy fora. This support focuses on enabling partners and communities to represent themselves, rather than CAFOD speaking on their behalf, except where necessary.

At community and country levels, CAFOD promotes locally-led and community-centred programming, with particular attention to the leadership of women and other marginalised groups. CAFOD also works with networks and peers to advocate for sector-wide reforms that enable local leadership, including improved funding quality, equitable partnership and meaningful risk-sharing by donors.

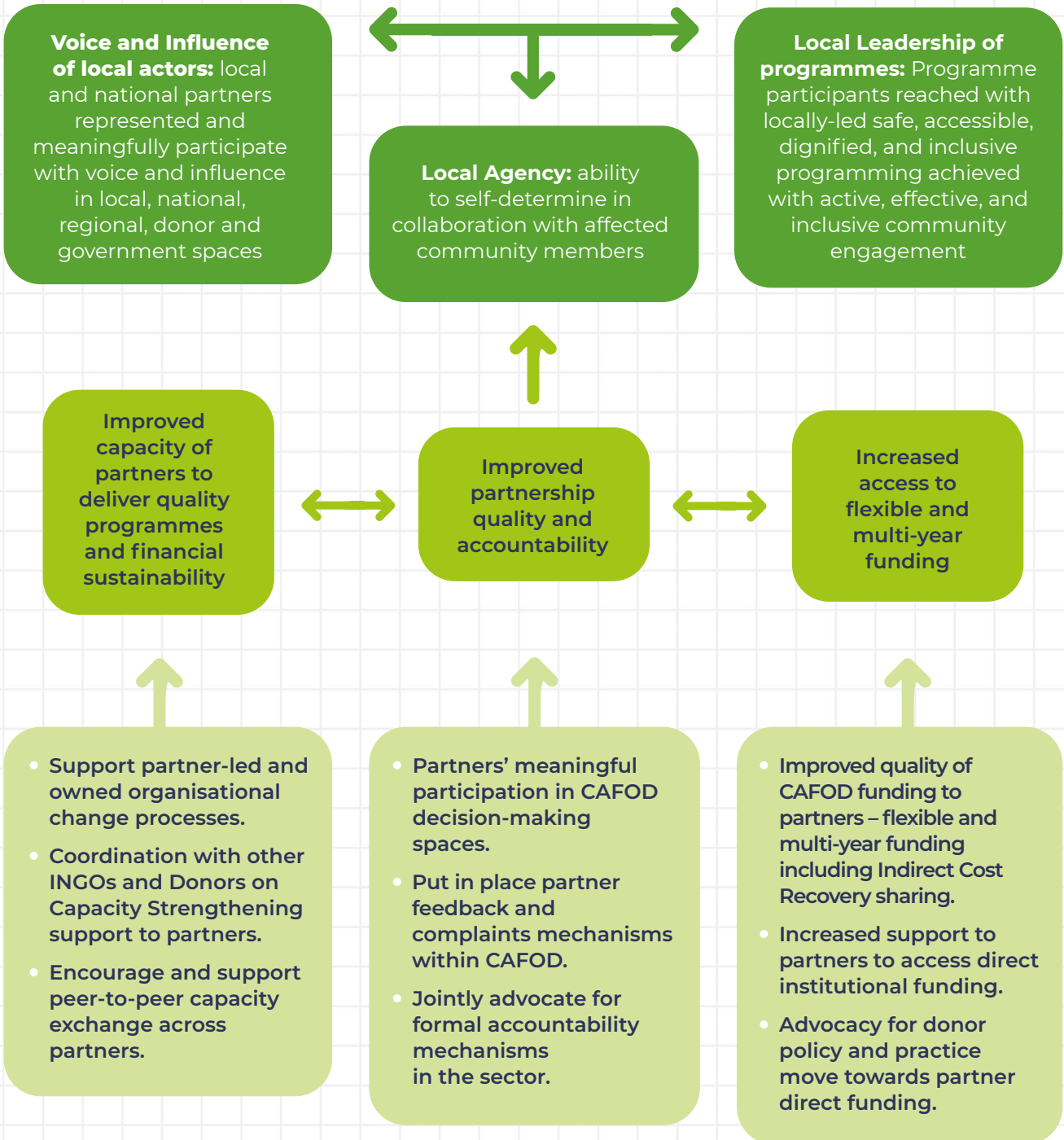
3. Locally-led humanitarian and development action

CAFOD's approach to locally-led action is rooted in a commitment to safe and inclusive programming that centres local agency and voice. This includes removing barriers to participation for vulnerable groups and accompanying local organisations, movements and networks to lead initiatives that affect their lives and communities. These commitments are embedded within CAFOD's organisational strategy and performance frameworks, shaping how programmes are designed, resourced and governed to strengthen community systems and support sustainable, long-term change.

In practice, locally-led action is reflected in community-centred programme design and decision-making, agile and context-responsive funding, and strong attention to community accountability and safeguarding. Operational choices are guided by local knowledge and priorities, enabling programmes to adapt to changing contexts while ensuring that power, resources and responsibility are held at the most local level possible.

Schematic representation of Goal 2: Local Leadership, in CAFOD's Strategy.

Our partners have the sustainable funding, organisational and programme capacities, and operational space to lead initiatives that meet the specific needs of their communities ([Our Common Home 2024](#))



3. LOCAL LEADERSHIP, AGENCY AND VOICE IN PRACTICE

This section illustrates how CAFOD's approach is realised in practice, through selected case studies and examples. The cases are drawn from independent evaluations, programme reviews and partner testimony, and are intended to demonstrate patterns of practice rather than isolated successes.

3.1 Contribution 1: Partner-owned organisational development and strengthening



*CAFOD partner
Depaul Ukraine
supporting families
with firewood and
window installations
to prepare for
cold weather.*

Credit: Depaul Ukraine

CASE STUDY

Ukraine: Equitable partnership and systems accompaniment



Context and Challenge

Before the February 2022 full-scale invasion, DePaul Ukraine (DPU) was a medium-sized CSO focused on homelessness in three regions, primarily supported by DePaul International (UK). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022, created an exponential increase in needs, and DPU became CAFOD's principal partner and the main recipient of our DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) funding in Ukraine. Over three years, DPU scaled-up rapidly. Their annual budget grew from £500k in 2022 to £5m in 2024 and their staff from 40 to 180+, bringing both opportunity and organisational strain. From the outset, CAFOD's intent was clear: support DPU's organisational resilience to ensure they could sustain their increased reach and continue their work after CAFOD exited Ukraine.

Our Approach

CAFOD sequenced support in two phases, first meeting essential programme quality and risk requirements while investing in partner-prioritised functions, and then moving to a more strategic, partner-led organisational development process.

- **PHASE 1** – Stabilise and enable delivery: In the first weeks and months of the partnership, we helped DPU meet core organisational standards (financial management, safeguarding), and strengthened project-level quality (protection mainstreaming, environmental risk assessment) to enable them to safely respond to the crisis unfolding around them. In parallel, we responded to DPU's own expressed priorities, which included "back-office" capacity such as logistics, supply chain management, security management, MEAL and IT. Through a mix of CAFOD staff secondments and specialist consultancies, we resourced these competencies in a responsive, on demand way, listening to DPU's needs from the ground, and responding to them quickly.
- **PHASE 2** – Consolidate and lead: As conditions in the country and within the organisation stabilised, CAFOD encouraged DPU to take a more strategic approach to their organisational development. We supported DPU to lead an organisation-wide self-assessment (using the CAFOD Humanitarian Capacity Self-Assessment tool). This led to the co-creation of an Organisational Development action plan covering 4 core areas: external engagement (fundraising, communications, advocacy); leadership (strategy, vision, culture); programme quality; resource management (HR, IT) and external engagement (communications, advocacy, fundraising). To finance this plan, CAFOD provided a multi-year flexible organisational development grant (£150k over 3 years, with potential to increase) from CAFOD's Ukraine Appeal, enabling DPU to use the funds to address self-identified priorities.

Results and Signals of Strength

DPU has so far reached 41,009 people across active projects, 32% of whom received cash and voucher assistance (13,190 people). Post-distribution monitoring with 3,014 respondents surveyed showed a 98% satisfaction rate with services. DPU's inclusive, non-discriminatory approach and outreach model enables them reach people excluded from mainstream aid (e.g., individuals without IDs), enabled by pre-existing shelters, outreach teams and faith-based networks.

Other areas of strengthened capacity include institutional fundraising and monitoring, evaluation and learning. Since the start of the organisational development process, DPU has hired a fundraising team, and secured a number of institutional grants independently, as well as designed and delivered a MEAL framework and system meeting Government of Canada standards for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) programming, which has opened up an additional funding source for MHPSS work in Eastern Ukraine. DPU has also hired an advocacy lead, and hosted a high-level policy event with national stakeholders, raising visibility and influence both nationally and internationally.

What We Learned about Financing Organisational Development

The combination of appeal and flexible funds was critical. Typical institutional project grants are too small, too short-lived, and almost always restricted



PARTNER VOICE

“They are never imposing their own ideas from their desk. Always trying to see the real needs on the ground. So I’m learning a lot... seeing how sensitive you can be in listening.”

Local implementing partner

to project-level capacities such as MEAL and safeguarding. Sustainable organisational strengthening and local leadership development requires support to whole-of-organisation functions such as HR, IT, fundraising, supply chain, and multi-year investment. Flexible organisational development finance is therefore essential to transition local organisations from implementer to leader.

Where Next: A Collaborative Organisational Development Pooled Fund?

CAFOD is advocating with sister Caritas agencies for a partner-governed pooled fund for institutional strengthening (initially for Caritas Spes Ukraine). A single framework aligned to the partner’s organisational development plan would reduce administrative burden, put the local agency in the driving seat, secure multi-year commitments, and allow additional contributors to join over time. The model is replicable across networks/consortia and builds on the strength of the Caritas Network.

Why This Matters

This case shows what partner-owned Organisational Development looks like in a high-pressure humanitarian context: meet minimum quality and risk requirements, resource partner-defined operational needs, then shift to partner-led strategy with flexible, multi-year finance. The combination of sequenced accompaniment + flexible OD funding + evidence-driven learning is enabling DPU to consolidate rapid growth into durable leadership for Ukraine’s response and recovery.



CAFOD’s humanitarian capacity-strengthening (HCS) model, developed based on consultation and experience with local partners, puts a partner-led change process at its centre. The HCS model reflects each partner’s capacity-strengthening priorities and preferences.

Progress is at the partner’s pace, with accompaniment support from CAFOD colleagues. Grants provide flexible resources for partners to implement and roll out activities internally and to hire local expertise as needed, alongside support for peer exchange between local partners. CAFOD’s role is increasingly that of a broker and/or facilitator.



PARTNER VOICE

“ENHANCE is not just a project; it is organisational. It allowed us to learn by doing, to test systems and to lead with confidence.”

SPOTLIGHT

Myanmar: Long-term accompaniment towards national level Humanitarian Leadership accompaniment

Through the multi-phase ENHANCE programme (2015–2025), CAFOD and partners in Myanmar supported a long-term journey from INGO-led humanitarian response towards nationally led and networked humanitarian leadership. Working with a lead national partner and its sub-national network, CAFOD invested in organisational systems, governance and leadership rather than short-term project delivery.

CAFOD and other consortium partners made annual organisational development investments ranging from approximately £60,000 to £100,000, with some of this provided as flexible and unrestricted funding. CAFOD embedded staff within partner structures to provide sustained accompaniment and support the development of humanitarian policies, emergency preparedness and response plans and protocols, coordination mechanisms, and accountability systems.

Independent evaluations indicate that this sustained, partner-owned approach contributed to significant growth in the lead partners’ leadership and operational capacity. The lead partner scaled from managing approximately USD 3 million in humanitarian funding in 2015 to over USD 30 million by 2025, and now operates as a national intermediary, sub-granting to local Civil Society Organisations and Community Based Organisations, and leading national coordination platforms.

This case illustrates CAFOD’s contribution to strengthening partner-owned institutions and demonstrates how long-term accompaniment and quality funding can support durable local leadership in highly constrained contexts.

On 28 March 2025, a serious earthquake hit Myanmar in an area already affected by conflict. Through the Catholic Church, our local partners provided emergency food, water and shelter to vulnerable families.





CAFOD and Trocaire in Partnership hosting a grants management and proposal writing workshop in South Sudan.

Credit:
William Degree Nicholas.

SPOTLIGHT

South Sudan: Partner-owned organisational development at scale



In South Sudan, CAFOD led a large-scale organisational development initiative aimed at strengthening local leadership, institutional resilience and preparedness among national and local organisations, which ran from October 2024 – January 2026. Funded by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Country-Based Pooled Fund, CAFOD supported the institutional and organisational development of approximately 68 organisations across South Sudan, with nearly 500 staff members (including senior leadership and board members) participating in capacity strengthening activities.

The capacity strengthening approach was explicitly designed to be partner-owned and multi-dimensional. Partners identified their priority areas and capacity gaps by completing a bespoke assessment tool designed by CAFOD and adapted for the South Sudan context. Partners were encouraged to reflect on their strengths and identify areas for growth, a process which led to the design and mapping of specific priority areas. Trainings were designed and delivered by CAFOD in-country staff, and covered nine thematic areas including governance, financial management, MEAL, safeguarding and emergency preparedness. Complementing the trainings, CAFOD staff visited partner offices to provide one-to-one coaching and mentoring support in the priority areas for each organisation.

Peer-to-peer exchanges were facilitated by co-implementing partner Nile Sustainable Development Organisation, which gave partners the opportunity to visit each other's offices, and learn from each other on systems, processes, and policies. This "local-to-local" capacity strengthening formed the crux of the project, ensuring a deeper, local actor owned and led process to capacity strengthening.

Early evidence suggests improved organisational confidence, strengthened systems, and increased readiness to engage with pooled funding mechanisms. While leadership outcomes are still emerging, this case demonstrates CAFOD's contribution to building institutional foundations for locally-led action over the long term.



PARTNER VOICE

"With the improved policies and systems, our organisation is now better equipped to achieve its mission and vision to serve the unserved by advancing women's rights and delivering effective and efficient programmes to create a world where all women live free of poverty and injustice."

3.2 Contribution 2: Partner Leadership, Voice and Influence in Policy and Systems Change

CASE STUDY

Bangladesh: Locally-led evidence shaping national and global policy and narratives on climate change impacts



Rehena Akter, returned migrant worker, speaking at the launch of CAFOD's partner OKUP's report, A far cry from justice for migrants.

Credit: OKUP



Overview

In Bangladesh's coastal belt, climate stressors and labour migration intersect with heightened risks of exploitation. Over the last two years, Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), a grassroots, migrant led organisation, with support from CAFOD, has used primary research and practice evidence from their work to shift national discourse and influence policy and coordination on safe migration and anti-trafficking.

Building the evidence base

With CAFOD and the University of Nottingham Rights Lab, OKUP and Caritas partners co-produced a mixed methods study (1,217 household surveys and 33 stakeholder interviews) that documented how climate hazards drive livelihood loss, migration, debt bondage risks and gendered harms like child marriage, and how these patterns vary across the Bangladesh–India border.

The dataset quantified issues long described qualitatively: 88% of Bangladeshi households reported climate related livelihood impacts; more than one third of households saw migration in the last five years, with clear links to exploitation risks. In parallel, OKUP consolidated qualitative data from casework (safe migration counselling, legal aid, psychosocial support and livelihoods for returnee women) into policy relevant insights, such as the need for standardised referral pathways, complaints mechanisms and survivor-centred reintegration packages.

Turning evidence into influence

OKUP's Access to Justice study and policy brief were launched with senior officials of the Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas



COMMUNITY MEMBER VOICE

“We are told our remittances are the lifeline of the Bangladesh economy, but we are not treated with dignity — not abroad, not at home”

Rehena Akter, returned migrant worker.

Employment, and the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training. This triggered dialogue on inter-agency coordination, the need to institute a streamlined complaints mechanism, and the subsequent development of referral guidelines in collaboration with the government. Ministry officials publicly acknowledged OKUP's contribution to these policy changes.

Building from the initial research study, OKUP published a collection of testimonies of climate migrants and families in the Sundarbans. OKUP took these publications to a number of high profile regional and global events, such as COP29 (Baku) and UNGA (UN General Assembly) Climate Week, where they presented powerful, community-generated evidence to donor and government audiences.

Early results and system shifts

The adoption of clear justice mechanisms such as the arbitration cell in the Bangladesh Ministry (a key advocacy area of OKUP's Access to Justice reports), to support migrants to access compensation, marks a transition from ad-hoc case handling toward codified pathways for migrant protection and redress. The presentations at COP29 and other platforms helped place climate induced migration and exploitation within donor and government policy discussions, reinforcing that climate finance, loss and damage, and protection systems must integrate safe migration and anti-trafficking.

These advocacy and policy gains sit alongside improved practices. With CAFOD's support, OKUP accompanied 110+ returnee migrants, many of whom are survivors of abuse, to file complaints and compensation claims. Evidence from these cases is now informing messaging on safe migration and accountable migrant recruitment.

How CAFOD contributed

CAFOD's role has been catalytic: co funding research, backing OKUP's national advocacy, opening up opportunities for OKUP to access global platforms (e.g. COPs), and accompanying organisational development. CAFOD financed the climate-migration-trafficking study and facilitated the OKUP/Caritas/Rights Lab research partnership, enabling a robust dataset to underpin advocacy. We supported OKUP's participation at COP29 and subsequently COP30, and brokered engagements with parliamentarians and government officials. Through an organisational assessment and follow up plan, CAFOD helped OKUP consolidate systems and strategy. We also connected OKUP to new direct funding opportunities in the UK and Sweden, reducing dependency and helping OKUP sustain their organisation and their activities.

Why this matters

The OKUP experience shows how locally-led, evidence driven advocacy can lead to systems change. The combination of community surveys, casework data and survivor centred proposals generated credible information that officials could act on. By standing alongside rather than standing in for our partner, we enabled a grassroots migrant organisation to shape both national processes and global narratives. This aligns with CAFOD's commitment to centring local leadership in decision making.



SPOTLIGHT

Honduras: Partner leadership securing policy protection for native seeds



CAFOD partner Red Comal are supporting farmers to learn about seed preservation, biodiversity protection and revitalising traditional farming knowledge.

*Credit:
Paz Redondo Cuesta*

For more than a decade, organisations within La Vía Campesina, alongside CAFOD partners including Red COMAL and the Centro Hondureño para la Promoción y el Desarrollo Comunitario (CEHPRODEC), have advocated for more favourable seed policies for farmers. Among other fruits of these efforts, between 2023 and 2025, CAFOD partner Red COMAL helped secure a Municipal Policy for the Protection of Native Seeds in Opatoro (La Paz), a landmark measure that formalises the municipality's commitments to conserve, promote and regulate native seed systems, placing food sovereignty and genetic diversity at the centre of local development.

Following the Supreme Court's 2022 ruling that the Law for the Protection of Plant Varieties was unconstitutional, the public discourse

shifted from repeal to active defence of native seeds and vigilance to protect them. Red COMAL commissioned and published a native seed pilot research study that showed that native maize and bean varieties have 92–100% germination rate, high tolerance to humidity, drought and heavy rains, and seed viability beyond one year. Producers sustained strong productivity across 67–210 day harvest cycles, while gradually reducing chemical inputs and increasing organic fertilisers, bio inputs and companion planting. The data underscored the resilience and viability of native seeds and the farmers who conserve them, reinforcing the case for the new policies.

At the national level, the Asociación Nacional para el Fomento de la Agricultura Ecológica (ANAFEA) partners led efforts to modify two articles in Honduras' seed regulation and to overturn the so-called "Monsanto Law," which had restricted the commercialisation of farmer-saved seeds while favouring GMOs (Genetically modified organisms). The Monsanto Law was declared unconstitutional in 2022, leading to the reinstatement of seed legislation dating from 1980.

At the municipal level, Red COMAL continues to advance policy initiatives, with the aim that successful local models will catalyse broader change at the national level.

The Opatoro policy translates years of advocacy into legally recognised local protections, while national level regulatory changes remove barriers that undermined farmer seed systems. Taken together, these decisions strengthen farmer rights and institutionalise space for agroecology, ensuring that native seeds and the communities who steward them are recognised in law and practice.



Native seeds are preserved in glass jars to preserve their properties, La Paz, Honduras. Credit Paz Redondo Cuesta.

*Credit:
Paz Redondo Cuesta*



SPOTLIGHT:

Global Advocacy Programme on Local Leadership of Crisis Response

CAFOD set up the Global Advocacy Programme (GAP) on Local Leadership of Crisis Response in 2022 to bring a more intentional focus to the campaign to centre local actors' leadership and voice in decision-making for humanitarian responses. CAFOD took a catalytic stance as a connector, accompanier, and evidence-builder, with local partners helping to shape and steer the programme. The strategy set clear outcomes: local leadership in coordination and decision-making, increased quality funding to local organisations (including women-led groups), and greater accountability for equitable partnerships between local actors and other stakeholders.

The impacts of the programme are beginning to be felt. For example, in Syria, CAFOD has supported faith-based partners, refugee-led organisations and grassroots women's groups on advocacy; linking their insights from their work on the ground to advocacy at national and global levels. Our sustained partnership with Syrian women's groups resulted in them leading on a high-level side-event to the Brussels Conference on Syria in 2024; in which women activists and community representatives decided the agenda, moderated the discussion and directly briefed the UK Special Envoy on Syria, senior UN officials and others. This built on a two-year project supporting grassroots women's groups to organise, identify their priorities for women's safe spaces, girls' protection and other issues, seed-funding projects to address those priorities and to then bring evidence from this experience to diplomats and decision-makers deciding on aid to Syria.

Syrian women civil society leaders meeting with senior diplomats, including the EU, US and UK special envoys on Syria, at an event that they planned and moderated with CAFOD's support, 2024

*Credit:
H. Mollett for CAFOD*



In Myanmar, CAFOD has supported local partners to build national and sub-national networks of first responders, strengthening their collective voice and influence with donors, UN agencies and INGOs, including advancing a locally-led pooled fund and other reforms to enable more equitable, frontline-driven humanitarian financing. Similarly, in Ukraine, CAFOD has supported the Alliance of Ukrainian CSOs to lead a national localisation agenda, resulting in concrete shifts by donors, UN agencies and INGOs towards locally-led pooled funds, direct funding to Ukrainian organisations, and systems designed and governed by local actors. Together, these examples demonstrate how sustained, locally-led partnerships can translate grassroots priorities into systemic change, reshaping humanitarian financing and decision making in ways that are more equitable and accountable to those closest to the crisis.

The programme is also making impact in the UK. FCDO has put locally-led, people-centred approaches at the heart of its new policy on Humanitarian System Reform. Guidance has been sent to all UK embassies encouraging them to explore innovative approaches, such as supporting informal, community 'mutual aid' groups and to consider innovative funding approaches that can better enable local leadership, such as through consortia or pooled funds designed in an intentional way to foster locally-led, modern partnership approaches.

In 2024, CAFOD collaborated with British Red Cross and FCDO to host a Donor Dialogue on Locally-Led Humanitarian Action that brought together senior officials with embassy advisors directly engaging with local civil society. Ideas they shared about innovative pooled funding mechanisms helped to catalyse work on a Donor Guidance Note on these issues, which FCDO subsequently developed together with other donors. One senior FCDO humanitarian official told us: "I want to acknowledge that you at CAFOD have pushed us at FCDO to explore what a deeper approach to localisation might look like for us, and to go further than we might have otherwise done."

Through CAFOD's role in co-leading a Grand Bargain Subgroup on Intermediary Agencies and Modern Partnerships over the past year, the FCDO and nine other donor governments have started to engage directly with local leaders from contexts as diverse as DRC, Somalia, South Sudan, Bangladesh and elsewhere to explore how to drive change on these issues in an aligned way across more donors.

*Anna Tazita Samuel,
female leader from
South Sudan, speaking
on a panel with heads
of UN humanitarian
agencies and Tom
Fletcher, the UN
Emergency Response
Coordinator, 2025*

*Credit:
H. Mollett for CAFOD*



The Global Advocacy Programme on Local Leadership of Crisis Response illustrates that when local networks lead, and an INGO uses its access to connect them to decision-makers and supports them to generate evidence, transformative change is possible. From changes in donor policy and funding practices; to engaging with UN agencies and INGOs on bridging the change from policy into changes in their practices; to supporting local actors on their own innovative advocacy or programme, funding and partnership practices, we can support local leaders to bring about the shift to putting communities most affected by crisis in the lead on the decisions that affect their lives.

3.3 Contribution 3: Grassroots mobilisation for humanitarian and development action



CAFOD partner Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria is supporting women and young girls to speak out against gender-based violence.

Credit: CCFN/JDPC
Pankshin

CASE STUDY

Nigeria: Women and youth-led transformative change in governance and GBV response



Context and trigger

In Barkin Ladi and Mangu Local Government Areas of Plateau State, Nigeria, the baseline assessment for the Accessible and Equitable Justice for Women and Youth initiative revealed a stark absence of targeted support for the economic and political empowerment of women and young people. Deep social divisions and low confidence significantly made it more difficult for women and young people to participate in community and governance processes. Alarming, over 70% of respondents reported encountering GBV (Gender-based violence) with widespread dissatisfaction regarding the accountability and handling of perpetrators.

Partner and community response

CAFOD's partner Justice, Peace and Development Commission of the Archdiocese of Jos (JDPC) ran civic participation and political mobilisation workshops that built confidence and clarified pathways to engage duty bearers. Following the workshops, the participating volunteers began to convene monthly community meetings, creating safe spaces for planning and problem-solving, and shifting delivery of the programme from staff driven to community-led.

The volunteers and participants began to visit local officials and traditional leaders to campaign for the inclusion of women and young people in public decision making, and to sensitise them on GBV prevention and response. They persuaded duty bearers and traditional leaders to sign commitments to raise awareness and act on cases. Secondary school awareness activities equipped teenagers with information on sexual abuse and referral options, and ward councillors began actively following up GBV and child abuse cases. The volunteers also initiated, self-funded and ran a public forum for local council chairmanship aspirants, setting the agenda and engaging candidates in the languages most comfortable for participants.

Locally led change

The project yielded multiple outcomes that went beyond those set at project inception. With a platform to organise, and the knowledge, skills, and confidence to use it, participating women and young people made real impact on how inclusive governance and protection worked in their communities. Recognition, reporting, and follow up on GBV cases improved as councillors, traditional leaders, and schools took clearer roles in prevention and response, tightening the local protection ecosystem. Dialogue with political office holders and aspiring politicians, anchored by the public town hall session, brought citizen-led oversight into the open and moved community priorities onto the political agenda, strengthening accountability in local governance.

Regular volunteer meetings evolved into hubs of peer support and mutual accountability, where practical problems were worked through together. These “safe spaces” also reinforced social cohesion by bringing groups of women and young people together across ethnic and religious lines to collaborate on issues they cared about, amplifying their voice and leadership.

Why this matters

Rather than substituting for local leadership, the programme focused on providing tools and creating safe, structured spaces in which women and young people could meet, build confidence, share concerns and organise collective action. With minimal external input, participants mobilised around their own priority issues, engaged duty bearers, and reshaped local responses. This case study illustrates how enabling people to come together, combined with light-touch facilitation, can catalyse real, community-led change.



*Farmers in Sri Lanka are learning about land rights, seed conservation and organic farming with CAFOD partner MONLAR
Credit: Thom Flint*

SPOTLIGHT

Sri-Lanka: Locally-led agroecology and farmer research driving ecological change





**COMMUNITY
MEMBER VOICE**

“I want to say that we are conducting research that can be told not only to our village, but to the entire country and the entire world.”

*Farmer-researcher
supported by
MONLAR*

In Sri Lanka, CAFOD’s partner the Movement for National Land and Agriculture Reform (MONLAR) has for decades inspired and empowered a vibrant people’s movement for just and sustainable development, anchoring a theory of change centred on active citizenship, alternative development models and interconnected structural change, with agroecology and food sovereignty at its core. MONLAR pursues an integrated approach which combines outreach to farmers and on-farm methodologies, original research and evidencing, mobilisation and campaigning, and advocacy and policy influencing – from local and national levels through to international networks and forums. Over the last three years, MONLAR has contributed to CAFOD’s Food Systems Global Advocacy Programme (GAP), alongside other Sri Lanka partners the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) and the Law and Society Trust (LST), building on decades of organising towards people-led food systems reform.

With CAFOD support, MONLAR conducted primary research on the effectiveness of agroecological approaches, working in collaboration with academics and farmers in an iterative process which began with developing and trialling a range of methodologies, and building through on-farm studies and farmer-led action research, to strengthen the evidence base for further outreach and policy influence.

The research study is testing vermicompost, jeewamurthum (natural, fermented liquid fertiliser), super compost and synthetic fertiliser to identify locally sustainable methods that improve yields and incomes, protect health, and restore soils. In this phase, 14 farmers across 5 districts (in 6 locations) prioritising 20 crops ran the trials, with results systematically documented and shared via farmer-to-farmer learning, academia, public symposiums, media and advocacy. Findings consistently showed organic inputs outperforming chemical fertilisers on yield and quality, with added benefits for cost (home production), soil health, water retention and crop resilience.

The farmer researchers are packaging the findings of their research, complete with case studies, cost-benefit analyses, and implementation pathways, into a “National Agroecology Transition Plan for a Resilient Agricultural Sector” to be presented to the Sri Lankan government. MONLAR highlights that “The farmers who co-created this research are not just subjects; they are experts. MONLAR will put them front and centre. A farmer explaining their own data and experience to a policy maker is far more compelling than an academic or NGO representative”.

In addition to generating valuable agricultural data to support advocacy, this farmer research model demonstrates grassroots, community-led development in action: farmers themselves define the questions, run and document the trials, and share results through peer-to-peer learning and advocacy. By combining scientific rigour with indigenous knowledge, the process builds local agency, strengthens community ownership of solutions and ensures that practice changes are rooted in contextual realities.



SPOTLIGHT

Lebanon: Leveraging mutual aid partnerships for community-led humanitarian response.

Following the escalation of war in September 2024, CAFOD supported partners in Lebanon to mount a rapid, community-centred response that prioritised dignity, trust and solidarity alongside the delivery of aid. CAFOD partners, Mada Association and Threads of Peace, activated field coordinators, volunteers and local mutual aid groups, many of whom they had nurtured and trained over the preceding years, to co-design and implement the response at neighbourhood level.

At the onset of the response, Threads of Peace teams conducted conflict sensitivity and nonviolent communication training to help volunteers and community members anticipate and reduce tensions between internally displaced people and host communities, linking the emergency to existing social cohesion work. This integrated response was essential in ensuring conflict sensitivity and contributing to social stability in a time of crisis.

Where needs spiked, Mada Association worked with numerous existing mutual aid groups, reallocating part of its programme budget to provide food assistance through local community kitchens to IDPs living in collective shelters in Beirut, illustrating the value of a flexible funding approach.

This emergency response initiative was not just about distributing aid; it was about investing in and upholding a longstanding commitment to mutual aid and local leadership, enabling existing community-led groups to take the lead during a crisis, and supporting volunteers that had been nurtured over the preceding years to play an active role in serving their communities.

The response was intentionally human-centred: coordinators and volunteers focused on respectful engagement, culturally appropriate support, and consistent presence, which strengthened trust and solidarity. This aligned with the goal of reducing tensions and enhancing cooperation between IDPs and their hosts within the community. Volunteers, described by field coordinators as the “lifeblood” of the effort, bridged organisations and communities, adapting quickly and drawing on local knowledge to target support and overcome logistical hurdles.

As one partner reflected, community-led solidarity “is not a new phenomenon here... our communal connections are the bedrock of our survival,” underscoring the role of preexisting mutual aid bonds in sustaining action through crisis.

4. MEASURING PROGRESS, LEARNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY



Caritas Brazil responding to extreme flooding in Rio Grande do Sul with the support of Start Fund.

Credit: Caritas Brasileira

CAFOD integrates LLAV outcomes into its organisational performance framework and monitors progress through partnership agreements, core programme reviews and learning processes. Oversight is provided by CAFOD's senior management and trustees.

CAFOD tracks both quantitative and qualitative indicators, including the proportion of partners receiving multi-year and flexible funding, partners' access to direct institutional funding, evidence of partner leadership and voice in decision-making spaces, and partner perceptions of power-sharing and accountability. Findings from CAFOD's 2025 Partner Survey provide an important lens on how our approach to local leadership is experienced by partners. Partners consistently highlight trust-based relationships, respect for local knowledge and CAFOD's responsiveness as strengths. Over 90% of respondents agreed that CAFOD's partnership approach supports partner leadership and adapts to changing contexts, and partnership quality scores averaged between 2.7 and 2.9 out of 3. Partners however reported lower levels of participation in funding allocation decisions and country strategy development, with scores ranging from 2.2 to 2.5 out of 3, and expressed a desire for greater transparency, more multi-year and flexible funding, and stronger support to access direct donor funding. These findings reinforce CAFOD's understanding of local leadership as an ongoing process of change rather than a completed state.

Some dimensions of local leadership, particularly shifts in power and influence, are difficult to measure. These are addressed by triangulating the data from the metrics above with qualitative information from partner feedback and partnership reflections, and the outcome of external assessments such as the CHS.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR DONORS, PEERS AND THE SECTOR

CAFOD in partnership with Caritas Jerusalem, are running medical units that provide mobile medical services and psychosocial support during the current Israeli-Palestinian Crisis.

Credit: Caritas Jerusalem



CAFOD's experience suggests that enabling local leadership requires more than rhetorical commitment. It demands changes in funding quality, risk management, partnership behaviour and accountability mechanisms.

For donors and peers, this includes investing in multi-year and flexible organisational development alongside programme delivery; recognising and sharing indirect costs; adopting risk-sharing and due-diligence passporting approaches; and supporting locally-led networks, hubs and intermediary models.

CAFOD will continue to share learning from its practice, to advocate alongside partners for system reform, and to adapt its own ways of working in pursuit of more equitable, locally-led humanitarian and development action.

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