

Who holds the levers of design?

Insights and ideas for cash and locally led response

The use of cash and voucher assistance (CVA), particularly in humanitarian and complex crises, is now an established practice, affording dignity and agency to affected communities, alongside programmatic flexibility. In 2023, an eighth of all Christian Aid's project funding went towards CVA, rising to over a fifth of our humanitarian response funding.

Christian Aid is committed to a locally led, partnership-based approach, and these CVA initiatives are all delivered with partner organisations. Drawing on their experiences in a wide range of countries and contexts, it is clear that international aid systems should start distinguishing between localising institutional CVA – which focuses on equipping local actors to work

within international CVA systems – and enabling CVA as part of locally led response – which focuses on equipping international aid systems to support and strengthen endogenous responses. Both approaches have value, but they are distinct from one another, and should be recognised as such.

Affected communities are always the first responders to any crisis, through spontaneous mutual aid initiatives. They are also the last responders, continuing to work towards long-term recovery and development years after international agencies have completed their programmes.



Despite their critical importance, endogenous responses – those initiated and delivered within local communities – are often harder to identify, measure and quantify than exogenous responses – those initiated and led by outside agencies. With less formal and less visible co-ordination networks, the impact, scale and efficiency of locally led response is widely under-recognised and under-valued.

Locally led responses often start from the position of ‘these are the resources we have, how can we best use them?’ But locally led CVA initiatives are often held to standards designed for institutional CVA, which are not appropriate or proportionate for locally led response. As such, these initiatives face significant barriers to securing funding, despite their potential.

With institutional CVA, there is a risk that harmonisation is becoming homogenisation. Locally led CVA has more potential to be truly people-centred, often capable of offering informal social protection and wraparound support more efficiently than the established humanitarian cluster system, or in a way which complements it. Efforts to localise large institutional CVA programmes to make them more inclusive and accountable have merit, but this is different to supporting local actors to use CVA within locally led response.

Our full discussion paper argues that we should see locally led response as a specialty and subset of localisation in its own right, affording it a specific space within the international aid system, with different tools, approaches and processes. This flips the focus of the debate, asking how the international system can adapt to and fund locally led action, instead of how local actors can adapt to the international system. Some of these adaptations involve new risks, but we argue that these risks can be mitigated, just as existing risks are, and they should not be viewed as deal breakers.

Recommendations

The CVA community and international donors should recognise the distinction between locally led response and localising institutional CVA. Although they complement each other, these are distinct approaches, and treating them as such enables practitioners to tackle the two issues separately, and to disentangle their funding streams. It is also important to note the distinction between inclusive and accountable CVA, and truly people-centred CVA.

Programmatic approaches which have the potential to enable locally led CVA are currently hamstrung by the application of standards and requirements that were designed for institutional CVA, and are not appropriate to locally led responses. The international aid system needs to adapt in order to enable rather than inhibit these programmatic approaches.

The CVA community currently focuses heavily on working within the cluster system, and should look beyond this set of constraints. While incremental changes will help to drive improvements, we argue for a more radical reshaping of the coordination model, and the role of international intermediaries within it, in order to fully embrace locally led response.

Our discussion paper explores four distinct areas:

Theory: we argue that large-scale CVA is not incompatible with locally led response. Although harder to track and quantify than exogenous responses, mutual aid already happens at scale.

Practice: highlighting three practical and scalable programme approaches by partners working in nine different countries and contexts, we show how CVA models can be modified to facilitate locally led responses. [These include the survivor and community led response \(sclr\) approach](#), the [Assess and Assist approach](#), and locally led climate adaptation and resilience.

Adaptation: we explore policy and process areas, such as risk mitigation, market assessments and procurement, where international actors could adapt to better support CVA within locally led response.

Funding: we consider how funding models and mechanisms could be adjusted to increase locally led CVA, reevaluating existing roles, models and systems, both within and beyond the cluster approach.

Conclusions

Highlighting the difference between localising CVA and using CVA as part of locally led responses gives us the flexibility to tackle the two issues separately. The efforts to link CVA (notably MPCA programmes) with social protection is a welcome development, as are efforts to localise this process. However, there remain a large body of actors who wish to operate outside of these international systems, but would still benefit from financial inputs.

Emerging trends in the humanitarian space show that these actors are worthy of funding directly and that locally led response meets them where they are, as opposed to asking them to mimic the international system. This is not a binary either/or alternative, but a question of complementarity. However, until the two approaches are disentangled with regards to possible funding streams, there will remain a tension.

Locally led response can and does reach scale in terms of aggregated reach. Indeed, local actors are the first and last responders to crisis. However, the term 'scale' in the international system is more connected to the concepts of consolidation, efficiency and how a single entity – such as an organisation, consortium, or heavily coordinated working group – can reach more people. Funding to local responders can reach scale but as this funding is diffuse it often is not counted: because it is not part of the aforementioned single entity, it falls outside the international system's established units of measurement.

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