

# Who holds the levers of design? Insights and ideas for cash and locally led response

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**Cover:** Fyness Tembo in Malawi as part of the Sosure Programme, run by Synod of Livingstonia Development Department (SOLDEV)

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## Glossary

**Cash and voucher assistance (CVA):** ‘refers to the direct provision of cash transfers and/or vouchers for goods or services to individuals, households, or group/community recipients. In the context of humanitarian response, CVA excludes payments to governments or other state actors, remittances, service provider stipends, microfinance and other forms of savings and loans.’<sup>1</sup>

**Institutional CVA:** a broad term to encompass the efforts of the international aid system and/or national governments to create harmonised CVA processes. Examples, would include Cash Working Groups (CWGs) delivering multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) as a single programmatic approach, linking humanitarian response to social protection and the range of other aspects that fall under this, such as shock responsive social protection.

**Local and national actor:** Local organisations are independent entities that are registered and/or operate at national or subnational levels. They include non-registered social movements, networks, etc. A local organisation must have an independent Board enabling decisions to be taken by that organisation itself. (A country office or field office or locally established body of an INGO where decisions are taken mostly by the global INGO leadership (eg with headquarters in the global North) would not be considered a ‘local organisation.’)

**Localisation:** ‘There is no single definition of “localisation”. Under the Grand Bargain, the signatories have committed to “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary,” while continuing to recognize the vital role of international actors, in particular in situations of armed conflict.’ Grand Bargain Workstream on Localisation<sup>2</sup>.

**Locally led response:** A form of localisation which channels institutional funding from ‘international aid structures’ to local/national actors or mutual aid groups to help them strengthen their own initiatives. More than the transfer of resources, it also relies on the transfer of power and control to those actors closest to the affected populations.

**Multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) (programme):** where cash working groups, or agreed links with social protection systems, harmonise tools and leavers of design (transfer value, frequency, targeting criteria, monitoring standards etc) to create a programme framework that any actor delivering MPCA is expected to follow.

**Multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) (theory):** ‘transfers (either periodic or one-off) corresponding to the amount of money required to cover, fully or partially, a household’s basic and/or recovery needs that can be monetized and purchased. Cash transfers are “multipurpose” if explicitly designed to address multiple needs, with the transfer value calculated accordingly. The extent to which a cash transfer enables basic needs to be met depends on the sufficiency of the transfer value and should be considered when terms are applied to specific interventions.’<sup>3</sup>

**Mutual aid:** the spontaneous and voluntary action of individuals, families and groups to help others from their wider community who are facing crises. Also known as community-led response, it happens based on affected people’s own resources and informal coordination.<sup>4</sup>

**People-centred response:** While there is no globally accepted definition of this term, anchoring this term to the ‘participation ladder’<sup>5</sup> provides a framework to aim higher than the current interpretation in the *State of the World’s Cash* report.

**Social protection:** Christian Aid follows the international definition of social protection, but this paper is mostly concerned with the work of The Social Protection Interagency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) Working Group on Linking Humanitarian (Cash) Assistance and Social Protection.

**Survivor and community led response (sclr):** ‘is one approach for building on mutual aid. Sclr aims to strengthen communities’ capacity to respond to rapid emergencies as well as reducing vulnerability to future crises. It uses a number of tools (including microgrants) to maximise local ownership, responsiveness, and connectivity while minimising the risks of doing harm. National NGOs (and where relevant local authorities) are seen as the primary facilitators of sclr.’<sup>6</sup>

## Executive summary

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

**'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.'**

have merit, but this is different to supporting local actors to use CVA within locally led response.

This 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.

The paper explores four distinct areas:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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.

### **Key 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.



## Introduction

Christian Aid has been committed to a locally led, partnership-based approach since its foundation in the 1940s. In addition, Christian Aid is committed to utilising cash and voucher assistance (CVA) approaches where appropriate. In 2023, 13% of all Christian Aid's project funding was used as CVA, including 21% of humanitarian funding – mirroring the average across the international aid sector.

Last year more than 70 of Christian Aid's partners used CVA, responding to crises centred on conflict and/or natural disasters. Learning from the successes and struggles that these partners experience has helped us to clarify our position on the state of CVA and locally led response. This paper will apply our learning to the strategic debates around these issues, as outlined in the CALP Network's 2023 report, *State of the World's Cash* (see figure 1).

CVA remains a key Christian Aid commitment when considering how best to facilitate partners' work. The dignity and programmatic flexibility CVA offers suits all our thematic focus areas<sup>i</sup> as well as our humanitarian portfolio. CVA is not an end in itself, so this paper is designed to show how it can support our work, notably in the area of locally led response.

Several factors have coalesced in recent years to inform our stance. Firstly, the rollout of the new cash coordination model<sup>ii</sup> has led to multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) being seen increasingly as a harmonised programme (or a de facto sector) within the cluster coordination model. Secondly, much of the cash policy emphasis has been on getting CVA to scale.<sup>iii</sup> Thirdly, there have been increasing links between humanitarian CVA and social protection systems<sup>iv</sup>.

None of these modifications are bad, and they show considerable progress from the position of cash coordination during the initial grand bargain in 2016. However, the emphasis on scale and MPCA makes CVA as a whole feel like an increasingly harmonised, systematic, digitised and consolidated

<sup>i</sup> Peacebuilding and conflict prevention; governance and rights; gender justice; and climate adaptation and resilience.

<sup>ii</sup> In 2022, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee adopted a cash coordination model to formalise the structure, function, and leadership of cash coordination within the humanitarian architecture (IASC 2022).

<sup>iii</sup> This is not an exhaustive literature review, but Mercy Corps 2023 and Kreidler and Rieger 2022 are among those that exemplify this trend. While much of the literature is nuanced (eg Juillard et al 2020), nuance is often lost at response level.

<sup>iv</sup> The Social Protection Interagency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B) Working Group on Linking Humanitarian (Cash) Assistance and Social Protection, has made humanitarian cash more interoperable with social protection systems.

### **State of the World's Cash report: strategic debates on locally led response and CVA**

- Is large scale CVA incompatible with locally led response?
- How can CVA models led by international actors be changed to facilitate locally led response?
- Can international actors adapt their mindsets and ways of working to align with and support local contexts and stakeholders?
- How should funding models and mechanisms be adjusted to increase locally led CVA?

Figure 1

process. As a result, localisation efforts have mostly been seen through the lens of how these large programmes can be more locally representative and accountable. There is merit in this process, but it is not the sole way many local actors wish to utilise CVA.

In responding to the strategic debates, we aim to show that **localising institutional CVA** is a different concept to having local actors use CVA as part of **locally led responses**.

Christian Aid and our partners believe that there are funding instruments and programmatic approaches that will allow the international aid system to both recognise and fund locally led responses. These initiatives will complement ongoing efforts to localise institutional CVA. These approaches will afford local actors greater choice and confidence in their application of CVA without them necessarily feeling forced to integrate into a prescriptive (harmonised) design.

## 1) Theory: Is large scale CVA incompatible with locally led response?

This section explores whether arguments that present large-scale CVA as being in opposition to locally led response can be overcome.

Christian Aid recognises that states are responsible for ensuring the social protection of their citizens. However, we acknowledge that ‘the lines can be blurred. In conflict situations, development activities may be absent from places that need long-term assistance because of insecurity; in these cases, non-governmental humanitarian agencies may deliver services that might otherwise be expected to be part of regular development programming.’<sup>17</sup>

Given that this blurring occurs in many of the locations where Christian Aid works, this paper will bundle social protection and large-scale CVA<sup>v</sup> (often MPCA) together into what we will term ‘institutional CVA’ (see figure 2). This is not to conflate social protection and humanitarian CVA, but to reflect that both these approaches represent more centrally controlled systems, owned and funded by either national governments, or the international aid system. We acknowledge that localising these efforts is important, but argue that this is distinct from

### Why do we say ‘institutional CVA’?

The Ukraine and Gaza Cash Working Groups have shown that the new cash coordination model often acts mostly as a de facto MPCA working group or sector. Targeting criteria, market monitoring, transfer values and monitoring tools are harmonised. They operate centralised deduplication systems and seek interoperability, in order to maximise effectiveness and efficiency.

There are plenty of advantages to this approach, including the potential to improve links with social protection systems. However, one disadvantage is that MPCA has evolved into a set programme, rather than a theoretical term. The move to homogenisation over harmonisation (Nimka 2021:25) has significant drawbacks for locally led response.

Often, the current system makes local actors feel that ‘cash’ is synonymous with ‘MPCA programme’. They may wish to use a different transfer value or frequency to deliver aid that meets basic or recovery needs – in line with the theoretical definition of MPCA – but fear that in not following the prescriptive ‘rules’ they are ‘doing it wrong’.

The result is that some local actors are either excluded from international funding, or self-exclude from those funding streams, despite offering effective and efficient uses of CVA. Some also continue to use in-kind assistance if the switch to CVA seems overbearing.

Figure 2

<sup>v</sup> Often MPCA or, sometimes, large scale sectoral cash assistance.

empowering locally led responses. Much of the current debate around CVA does not make this distinction sufficiently clearly.

Our position is that mutual aid, and locally led response, already reach scale. Communities are the first and last responders to crisis<sup>8</sup>. However, as this endogenous response and reach is not tracked, its impact is mostly overlooked. Under the current system, the interpretation of 'scale' normally focuses on the exogenous response, meaning the amount of funds that can be dispersed and the number of people directly receiving it from the international aid system.

This makes the locus of scale a single unit (eg large organisations, consortia or working groups) rather than seeing scale as a wider system. An imperfect analogy is comparing a single large firehose channelling water to a blaze, to one hundred people throwing buckets of water. Even if the 100 people can collectively move as much water as the hose, when the locus of scale is centred on the unit, a single person becomes compared to a mechanised pump.<sup>vi</sup>

Even when the international aid system tracks its own scale – measuring, for example, the total volume of overseas development assistance or of CVA specifically – there is no realistic benchmark for the reach and impact of mutual aid which allows meaningful comparison. Because we cannot see or measure the mutual aid system in its totality, we often end up comparing the volume of funds of the international aid system to individual local actors, and not the totality of funds all local actors and mutual aid groups use.

Discussions thus often focus on the size and capability of a specific local actor; absorption capacity, reach and ability to meet international standards. These concepts often come with negative narratives. In contrast, viewing mutual aid in its entirety would likely show a faster response and also a vast informal coordination system which is impactful in its own right, and provides a foundation for international actors to build on. This perspective flips the debate. Instead of focusing on how local actors can adapt to the international system; we can explore how the international system can adapt to and fund this locally led action.

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<sup>vi</sup> The firehose example is figurative: we assume that fire engines are the appropriate tool for putting out large fires and hoses probably have more capacity than 100 buckets. To push a little further though, some may say that consortia, or the coordination system (eg cash working groups) are ways to mobilise 100 buckets. However, consortia would likely standardise the response (eg decide how big the buckets should be, how they should be filled and how often, and how to report how many buckets were thrown etc). This harmonisation is why we would consider a consortium a single unit.

## Comparing and contrasting locally led CVA and localising institutional CVA

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee states that ‘there is no single definition of “localisation”. Under the Grand Bargain, the signatories have committed to ‘making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary,’ while continuing to recognize the vital role of international actors, in particular in situations of armed conflict.’<sup>9</sup>

Our position is to distinguish between the process of localising institutional CVA and expanding locally led CVA<sup>vii</sup>. We accept that this is more of a spectrum than a binary alternative, but have presented a contrasting table to emphasise the key points of distinction.<sup>viii</sup>

	Locally led CVA	Localising institutional CVA
What is it?	Where local actors have control over the coordination, design, and implementation of CVA. It can also describe how the international aid system can link into existing mutual aid initiatives. An approach that ‘takes into account a broader view and elements that exist outside the international system’. <sup>10</sup>	Either state institutions or the international aid system working to be more accountable to local actors, and more inclusive of localised contexts, in the design and implementation of their social assistance. This often applies to large scale (harmonised) CVA programmes and reflects ‘the view of the International [Aid] system by that system’. <sup>11</sup>
What are the key focuses of the approach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Built on preexisting knowledge, considers contextual local knowledge and expertise, often focuses on root causes and structural tension.</li> </ul> <p>The unit of measurement is often the community level, in addition to households or individuals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Harmonising the levers of design, such as transfer value, frequency and targeting criteria, for consistency.</li> <li>▪ Efficiency gains by creating a unified approach.</li> <li>▪ Unit of measurement is usually the household or individual.</li> </ul>

<sup>vii</sup> This distinction builds on ALNAP’s work in splitting localisation from locally led response (Viswanathan 2023). We don’t want to challenge the wider use of the term localisation, which has varied definitions, so have instead opted to talk of distinguishing ‘localising institutional CVA’ from locally led CVA.

<sup>viii</sup> It should also be noted that we see locally led response as being run by local and national actors, and that sometimes these locally led responses link with our definition of mutual aid (see glossary for all definitions).

<p>How is it being localised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Currently faces challenges to accessing institutional funding and recognition as a separate entity.</li> </ul> <p>The addition of a community-based initiatives task force or technical working group has been explored in some responses, for example in Gaza.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Efforts to make cash working groups more inclusive, such as translations and local actor representation.</li> </ul> <p>Creating a division of labour for local actors, with specific roles such as targeting recipients, being last mile distributors, or influencing for policy changes.</p>
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This distinction also allows us to question some of the fundamental assumptions we are making when talking about localisation and CVA. It lets us ask how the international system can fund locally led response, as well as how to get local actors involved in the institutional response. In turn this helps unpack more questions around the processes and tools that would need to change to help establish locally led CVA, instead of holding locally led response to institutional CVA standards. These questions will be elaborated in debate three below.

In reviewing these underlying assumptions, it is possible to also free institutional CVA from some of the pressures of localisation. It can indeed become more localised, but the pull of harmonisation and consolidation will ultimately mean that it will never be fully locally led, nor should it be necessarily. The point of this distinction is to give local actors more choice to utilise CVA.

## 2) Practice: How can CVA models be changed to facilitate locally led response?

We acknowledge that there are myriad efforts to work towards this goal<sup>ix</sup>. However, we would like to highlight three particular approaches that can boost locally led response utilising CVA:

- The survivor and community led response (sclr) approach, which has been developed by Local to Global Protection (L2GP)
- The Assess and Assist (A&A) approach, piloted by Christian Aid's partners in Ukraine
- Locally led anticipatory action and climate resilience, which utilise CVA.

<sup>ix</sup> As reflected in the State of the World's Cash Report among other places.

In addition, figure 3 shows that while progress has been made on inclusivity in institutional CVA, there is still work to be done.

## Survivor and community led response (sclr): emerging practice

'Acknowledging that crisis-affected people are the first and last crisis responders, [the sclr approach](#) has to be adapted to every single context – and continually adjusted over time. Sclr aims to 'increase the scale, impact and momentum of crisis-affected people's initiatives to help each other to survive with dignity, strengthen communal wellbeing and to start addressing root causes of vulnerability'. Sclr complements other modalities within mainstream humanitarian response, as well as local government interventions, by supporting and strengthening the existing holistic initiatives of local crisis-affected populations.

The 'software' within sclr that accompanies the microgrant process (the 'hardware') includes appreciative enquiry, do less harm, experiential learning and connecting and networking, all of which are integrated into both the sclr toolkit and local NGOs' ways of working<sup>x</sup>. The local NGO giving the microgrants, often called the facilitating agency, works alongside groups in the community to design a microgrant-giving process that is inclusive. **The process considers locally appropriate measures that ensure accountability and minimise conflict and the negative influence of imbalanced power structures.** Ideas from the community are then funded with microgrants and implemented by the community groups. The facilitating agency takes a mentoring and supportive role, strengthening groups' capacities based upon the objective of their initiatives.

Christian Aid and other peer agencies that are part of L2GP, including Dan Church Aid (DCA), Act Church of Sweden, Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits (ECOWEB) and East Jerusalem YMCA, have been implementing sclr programming alongside partners and communities since 2016, in diverse contexts such as the Philippines, Kenya, Gaza, Myanmar, and more recently in Haiti and Lebanon<sup>12</sup>. Communities and partners have seen the benefit of sclr in responding to a variety of crises and diverse challenges, such as chronic poverty,

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### There is still a need to keep the pressure on the localisation agenda for institutional CVA.

Juliett Donna- Project Manager at CEFORD explains, 'The cash working group is dominated by INGOs and UN agencies in my context in Uganda. This is because of the assumption that local and national actors lack capacity in delivering CVA. Eg they have no infrastructure in place and so they rarely get to implement CVA. As such the likes of the UN and INGOs dominate the leadership space, because they have the financial muscle. INGOs should accompany local partners in CVA delivery either through secondment of technical staff or walking along in implementation. The local actors should be given the opportunity to co-lead at least at lower and national level. By doing this, the INGOs will be strengthening capacity, boosting confidence of local partners. The local actors are capable of co-leading.'

Figure 3

<sup>x</sup> Christian Aid see sclr as distinct from group cash transfers (GCT), which are mentioned in CALP's State of the World's Cash report. We are working with various other actors to help demystify these two similar and interconnected concepts.

natural hazards, escalation or protracted conflict and displacement.

In 2023 the sclr approach had a programmatic volume of around \$16m in fourteen countries<sup>13</sup>. It has been funded by institutional donors such as Start Fund, Irish Aid, Danida, Sida, FCDO, and ECHO,<sup>xi</sup> and by philanthropic donors such as Legatum, CDP, Vittol and RadioAid. However, sclr work is hard to fit into a cluster coordination model predicated on institutional CVA, so it is not yet reaching its potential scale.<sup>14</sup>

### Assess and Assist (A&A): flexible approaches to partner-led CVA

In Ukraine, Christian Aid piloted an [approach called Assess and Assist](#)<sup>15</sup>. It was based on linking light touch psycho-social support with local knowledge, referrals to other services and cash transfers to meet specific needs of individuals or households. In some respects, it is the peer approach to sclr, but more at a household and individual level. It aims to interpret the concept of needs holistically, and as such it was housed in the protection cluster. However, this is not an ideal fit as the global definition of cash for protection (C4P) is still contested.<sup>xii</sup>

One of the flexibilities of the A&A approach was that it allowed different partner organisations to tailor CVA approaches to their needs and contexts. One of the initial findings was that some organisations liked this flexibility to control the levers of design, while others preferred to work with MPCA because the levers were fixed for them<sup>xiii</sup>. The Assess and Assist methodology is based on having few initial assumptions and listening to those in need, then responding to those needs. In this way it is viewed as people-centred, as defined in figure 4. The development of the operating procedures is based on probing questions and case studies, more than prescribed steps to follow. This approach is seen as the best way to ensure the delicate balance of meeting international standards

<sup>xi</sup> Although as sclr often challenges some of the traditional ways of working, compromises have had to be made from both donors and implementers. In some instances, it should be said that there has only been partial success, and often sclr looks more like a group cash transfer.

<sup>xii</sup> 'Some organisations advocate for a more holistic interpretation and operationalisation of C4P, opposing a restrictive, sectoral definition... Conversely, some organisations strongly believe and adopt a very rigid definition of C4P at an operational stage.' (Young et al 2023:6).

<sup>xiii</sup> While some local actors took key points like the transfer value, frequency, and harmonised post-distribution monitoring from the cash working group, they did not complete a full integration into all the interoperable systems as these were seen as too complex and abstract for their small caseloads.

### People-centred approaches are more than just being inclusive and accountable.

We see a divide between inclusive and accountable CVA, and people-centred CVA, roughly in line with Arnstien's ladder of participation (Arnstien 1969). Needs assessments are 'consultative', feedback mechanisms help with 'placation', and people knowing their rights is a key pillar of 'informing', but ultimately these will only leave projects in the 'tokenistic' level. This is exemplified by Ground Truth Solutions' feedback in the *State of the World's Cash* report: 'People generally feel aid providers respect them, but very few feel that their opinions are considered.'

Herein is the key to the distinction. For programmes to be truly people-centred, recipients need measures of control such as vetoes on design decisions, sharing funding, negotiating conditions, or putting forward requests proactively. With less than that we can be inclusive and accountable, but truly people-centred responses are more in line with the 'citizen power' rungs of the participation ladder, rather than the 'tokenistic' levels.

We should be careful not to conflate people-centred solely in line with local context. Social norms cannot undermine universal principles of inclusion and accountability. However, locally led CVA has more opportunity to be truly people-centred than institutional CVA.

The participation spectrum (IAP2 2024) also offers a viable framework, as opposed to the 'participation ladder', both offer the chance to link the concept of 'people-centered' to an external framework.

(Figure 4)

to avoid doing harm, giving control and agency to local actors for the design and use of CVA, and being people-centred in orientation.

### Locally led climate adaptation and resilience

Christian Aid has a long history of resilience programming and locally led adaptation and climate risk management. Increasingly, these more traditionally development approaches are utilising CVA modalities. Some examples include anticipatory action via group cash transfers (Bangladesh) or household level CVA (Malawi). However, there are other approaches and modalities which Christian Aid encourages, such as integrating MPCA components into longer term projects, or the use of group cash transfers in different ways for different climate adaptation structures.

As with localisation, there is a long history of this type of work that CVA is now linking with more structurally. The ability to recognise and support communities directly is key. If they are to pursue localisation and locally led responses as a priority, the CVA community should consider the role that CVA could play outside and beyond the traditional cluster coordination model. Give Directly (2020) and others have also helped expand the notion of CVA as a poverty alleviation tool (development approach) and not just an arm of humanitarian response. Much of our CVA focus is on the cluster coordination model, but CVA is also common in resilience and development programming. Changing the narrative that 'CVA is just for humanitarian' will also be important in the years to come.

### 3) Adaptation: Can international actors adapt their mindsets and ways of working to align with and support local contexts and stakeholders?

So far, we have shown that disaggregating locally led CVA from localising institutional CVA is critical, and we have highlighted three examples of locally led approaches that utilise CVA and are both practical and scalable. The question then turns to how we can make this happen.

In the same way that local actors are not homogenous, neither are international actors. For example, in Sudan one UN agency needed 20 waivers signed to provide funds to mutual aid

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### Cash approaches for resilience work

In Pakistan, with Funding from the UN World Food Programme, Foundation for Rural Development (FRD) has worked with relevant government departments such as Forestry, Social Welfare, Agriculture and Livestock to enhance the resilience of local communities by involving them in communal welfare. The entire process was participatory, and the communities were engaged in the identification and selection of beneficiaries and also in the provision of schemes as per their needs.

Figure 4



groups<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, the sclr approach was designed around the principle of supporting mutual aid initiatives and those implementing it don't need to sign waivers to facilitate this process. So different international actors will have to navigate these challenges along their own path.

## Rethinking technical approaches to enable locally led response

Much has been written about the mindset and policy shifts required to aid the localisation agenda and we will not rehash those arguments here. Our focus will bring the spotlight back to concepts directly linked to implementing CVA. Below are some examples of CVA conventional wisdom, which might need rethinking for international actors to better engage with locally led CVA. These technical issues have been raised by partners discussing their implementation challenges with Christian Aid colleagues in recent years.

Some of these challenges create new risks, but we also argue that we have mitigation measures for the new risks that these approaches entail. Why is locally led response held to the same or higher standards than more institutional CVA? There are risks in the current way of working, yet these are viewed as mitigable. The risks of working in locally led responses are also mitigable, but this will be easier if locally led response is viewed as its own specialty.

### Theory and practice of basic needs support

We have seen some very large MPCA programming in recent years, often in very challenging circumstances. The volume of cash disbursed and number of recipients reached is commendable. However, there is some evidence that, despite its relative speed, institutional CVA is still slower and less reliable than mutual aid in many respects (see figure 6). For example, surely the effort to harmonise transfer values at a rate that sustains basic needs per month is undermined if it is logistically and financially impossible to assist people for the duration of their need? Mutual aid often fills these gaps, and this complementarity can be capitalised on if locally led CVA is given a specific space and funding within the international aid system.

### Harmonisation is becoming homogenisation

### Analysing the locally led response in Ground Truth Solutions user journey mapping in Ukraine (2023)

When looking at Ground Truth Solutions user journey study in Ukraine several points are clear. The Ukraine MPCA response is the world's largest and has many cutting-edge features such as; an advanced deduplication process, myriad efforts to enhance interoperability, and links with existing social protection systems. However, despite this it is interesting that MPCA payments appear a) with a significant lag after displacements, (displacements, returns etc), b) often are single payment<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, in-kind assistance from local councils, NGOs, and churches invariably arrives before MPCA (and other cash assistance) and lasts for more protracted durations. Despite the technical 'knowhow', it seems the International Aid system, still supplies aid that is sporadic and unpredictable, compared to locally led responses. This should help us reframe the debate around CVA to 'how can we get LNAs to use CVA for locally led responses' in tandem to 'how can we localise Institutional CVA.

Figure 5

This is increasingly making MPCA programmes appear like standardised entitlements, despite their needs-based mandate. For example, as an internally displaced person (IDP) you may end up entitled to three months' worth of assistance during a six month period. Alternatively, programmes may be supply-based, limited by the amount of available funding and/or issues such as access to those who should receive CVA. Locally led response can offer needs-based wraparounds to complement these activities.

### **What information counts, and who is the information for?**

Large assessments may be required for institutional CVA. If you are harmonising targeting criteria, market monitoring and transfer values, establishing consolidated delivery mechanisms and creating interoperable systems, then centralised decision makers will need a considerable amount of comparable data. However, for locally led responses, some of these processes are either not applicable or could work in different ways. For example:

- If people say they want cash, why must local actors simultaneously 'prove' they can spend it with market data?
- Cash feasibility assessments have fallen down the agenda recently, but it should be possible to fully integrate these concepts into preparedness and partnership processes, rather than keep standalone assessments which could be a barrier to entry to CVA for local actors.
- Sourcing financial service providers is often viewed through the lens of procurement, as something to complete in the inception stages of projects. Locally led response has the potential to be more tailored to individual preferences, with providers selected at implementation stage, and utilising lighter touch due diligence processes.

### **The centrality of the household or community**

The minimum expenditure basket (MEB) indexed approach is a logical build up from an individual through a household, but this often leads to 'undercoverage by design'. Locally led approaches can be centred on a supply-based design – starting from a position of 'these are the resources we have, how should we best use them?' – and can operate at a community level. It should be noted that the 'soft sides' of locally led approaches are designed to counter risks of diversion, elite capture and

exclusion (see annex 1 for more details), so we question why these processes are still viewed with suspicion.

### Considering alternative coordination

One of the main challenges of localising institutional CVA is getting local representation in cash working groups, encouraging participation and attendance. However, this assumes that the goal is for local actors to integrate into an exogenous system. While this might be important for institutional CVA, Cash Working Groups should also be open to the fact that they can play a role in facilitating locally led CVA outside of this formal coordination system. Just because the exact network and coordination system of locally led response might not be immediately visible or understood, it does not mean it is not there. Local actors coordinate spontaneously, continuously and rigorously.

While the areas above represent mindset shifts for CVA actors, notably international actors, they are not the only ones who may require a shift in perspective. It is not uncommon for local actors to push back on CVA for many of the traditional reasons, citing concerns such as 'people won't spend the money correctly' and 'cash is more risky than in-kind aid.' While cash offers more dignity and is an empowering concept, an uncomfortable truth is that it often needs to be pushed from the top down. However, the way in which this is done is critical. It should be approached with a spirit of humility and unlearning, otherwise it risks being another compliance imposition.

### Processes and policies for working with CVA and locally led response

There is an acknowledgement that for CVA it is not just a case of what you do but how you do it. The same applies to locally led response. Christian Aid has identified two broad areas for learning in this respect.

#### The design process

When contextualising to local requirements, ensuring international standards on compliance and quality, most importantly the core humanitarian standards, is a common challenge. While this is a whole area of study, a brief word on it will be useful. One way that Christian Aid is aiming to expand its CVA guidance is via our 'contextualised standard operating



Figure 6: Heritage Ukraine's planning- photo credit David Green

procedures templates', with our cash guidelines based around 'probing questions'. The aim is to have partners explain why they are doing what they are doing and how they are doing it, while allowing them the space to make the decisions and explain things in their own words, rather than having to speak the language of the international aid system. The focus is more on 'you tell us what you want to do, and we can tell you what that is called in aid speak'. The approach allows partners to maintain control of the project design, but ensures that key cross cutting issues like inclusion, accountability and safeguarding are covered.

There is nothing new in this approach. It is built out of well-established principles of thinking and working politically, reflecting Green's approach 'Some tools empower/encourage people to think harder, others disempower/make people think less...My rule of thumb is give people questions to ask, and lots of case studies, but don't tell them what answers to look for.'<sup>17</sup>

However, before moving to possible system-wide reforms, it should be noted that at an organisational level there are several policies that have enabled Christian Aid to pursue the locally led CVA agenda.

### **Organisational policy shifts**

Christian Aid is one of the co-founders and signatories of the Pledge for Change and Charter for Change, reflecting our commitment to localisation and to equitable partnerships. We value our partnership cycle as much as the specific project cycle, trying to think for the long term even when the urgent need to implement challenges staff every day. Our commitment to strengthening partners is also reflected in our indirect cost recovery (ICR) policy, which sees us pass on to partners 50% of the ICR funding that we receive from donors, as well giving 10% of unrestricted grants as ICR.

Lastly, Christian Aid recognises that there are several risks and potential objections to the wider implementation of locally led response, summarised in annex 1. However, there are risks with all interventions. We want to challenge international actors not to hold locally led responses to institutional CVA standards. It seems that, at present, risks to institutional CVA are viewed as 'mitigable', but risks for locally led response are often seen as deal breakers. We view locally led CVA as a complement to institutional CVA, not a replacement of it. We ask international actors to acknowledge locally led CVA and to begin to fund it and work through the risks. Some options for this process are outlined in the next section.

## 4) Funding: How should funding models and mechanisms be adjusted to increase locally led CVA?

There are three levels of change to consider: incremental changes to the current system, wider reform of the coordination model and a reshaping of the role international intermediaries play.

### Incremental changes to the current international aid system

There are plenty of options for new funding models which are helping drive the localisation agenda, such as country-based pool funds (CBPF), local-actor-only pooled funds, local actor consortia etc<sup>18</sup>. However, if these are linked to prescriptive sectors or have proposal approval processes linked to harmonised MPCA systems, they are helping to localise institutional CVA more than drive locally led response. The question is not simply channelling funds to local actors, but what are they 'permitted' to do with those funds. For example, the first report from the UN's Flagship Initiative stated, 'However all said the South Sudan CBPF in 2023 was very emergency, and very traditional'<sup>19</sup>.

As previously stated, harmonisation of institutional CVA is not necessarily a problem – every actor involved gives up some agency to help deliver a systematic approach. The problem is that not all local actors wish to participate in this system.

One additional option is to also embed a Community Led Initiatives task force into Cash Working Groups (CWGs). However, while these steps are welcome, international actors must take care not to recolonise locally led initiatives. There is a risk of isomorphism,<sup>xiv</sup> and of calls for more standards and harmonisation. Changes and reforms that help to drive the localisation agenda should be encouraged, but primarily to open a space for supporting locally led CVA through the international aid system. As it stands, CWGs are already very overburdened and have become de facto MPCA clusters/sectors. Adding a community led initiatives task force may give locally led CVA legitimacy within the system. However, the aim is to make the system more adaptive to locally led

Why is locally led response held to the same or higher standards than more institutional CVA?

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<sup>xiv</sup> Isomorphism is where a process looks and sounds like something without actually changing the fundamental power structures. It is the adoption of a concept to look like change rather than create change.

responses so wider reform is needed to make more efficient use of the complementary nature of locally led CVA and institutional CVA.

Another critical discussion is around the proportion of international funding that should be channelled to locally led responses. The aim of this paper is to advocate for seeing locally led response as a distinct process, but key is to recognise the legitimacy of the space. In Sudan, the locally led 'emergency rooms' have requested 5% of response funding<sup>20</sup>. Christian Aid would see this as a reasonable value to propose as an initial target for funding locally led CVA.

## Wider reform of the international aid system

Ultimately though, wider reform will be needed in order for the international aid system to fully embrace locally led responses. The Global Fund on Loss and Damage and calls for global funds to use cash transfers to target poverty reduction<sup>21</sup> show that there is an appetite for new specialised global funds. There is an opportunity to consider locally led response as a specialty worthy of its own global fund, but it should at least be seen as a specialty in its own right by institutional donors.

Indeed, given the cost of a funding model built around international intermediaries as a means of compliance, there is a possibility that higher donor overheads but more direct funding might lead to efficiencies overall. Share Trust estimate that 'local intermediaries could deliver programming that is 32% more cost efficient than international intermediaries, by stripping out inflated international overhead and salary costs.'<sup>22</sup>

The aim would be to have a fund or a set of technical expertise embedded within donor organisations geared towards meeting local actors where they are at, rather than asking local actors to meet existing standards. Whenever a portion of humanitarian response funding comes from outside the affected country, it would be advisable for the international aid system to find a way of directly funding mutual aid, and to use this as a vehicle for increased use of CVA by local actors.

As we noted in figure 4, the cluster system is inherently not people centred. Ultimately this architecture needs redrawing to meet the twin needs of localisation (including locally led response) and making the international aid system truly people centred. The exploration of area-based approaches is

something Christian Aid supports, but this paper won't set out a vision of a new architecture in detail.<sup>xv</sup>

While it may seem that this paper has been critical of institutional CVA, this is not meant to be the case. The aim is to show that, for all its merits, it still has flaws which can be offset by complementary approaches such as locally led response. Ultimately though, the international aid system and architecture, notably the cluster coordination model, should be redrawn. MPCA is in a prime position to be a central pillar of that new system, but one which can be complemented by locally led responses.

### Reshaping the role of the intermediary

While international intermediaries (INGOs and UN agencies) can often be extractive and expensive layers in the international aid system, it is not to say they do not have a role to play. More direct funding bypassing intermediaries is indeed a welcome idea, and this will be enabled by having locally led response seen as an approach in its own right. However, myriad papers and ideas have shown that there are a range of continued roles for these institutions to play<sup>xvi</sup>. Likewise, some local actors are more comfortable engaging with international intermediaries than directly with different donors. As mentioned in figure 3, seconding INGO staff to local actors and other accompaniment/mentoring models can also be used. Again, this is well worn ground and not one that CVA need necessarily 'rediscover'.

## Conclusions and recommendations

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

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<sup>xv</sup> For further discussions on how this could look, Christian Aid is happy to discuss our proposals.

<sup>xvi</sup> Examples include Mathews 2023; and Aaronson and Thompson 2023.

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. Below are the main recommendations we are proposing.

### Recommended terms, concepts and discussion points

- The CVA community should recognise the difference between locally led CVA and localising CVA, which will help them adopt more appropriate strategies for interacting with different local actors.
- Likewise, although not the main focus of this paper, the CVA community should recognise what makes a response people centred, beyond being accountable and inclusive, and should aim for this. The bar is currently set too low for CVA actors to claim that their work is truly people centred.

### Questions for consideration and further discussion

- How can the international system fund locally led response, instead of asking local actors to adapt to institutional CVA? And what proportion of funds should be channelled this way?
- Why does it seem that locally led response is held to the same or higher standards than institutional CVA? What makes some risks mitigable within projects and others ‘deal breakers’ for funding?
- What CVA specific processes and tools could be adapted to better fit locally led response? These include, for example, rethinking the role of feasibility assessments,



Figure 7: RCBIF's livelihoods work in Burundi, credit Laura Ashton-Booth



market assessments, the procurement of financial service providers and the risks associated with harmonised transfer values, but there are many more.

- Can we learn to trust what we cannot always see or measure – such as the scale of mutual aid, and local actor coordination networks? We should constantly question what information counts and who it is for.

We do not hold all the answers as Christian Aid, nor do our partners. That said, some of the approaches, processes and tools we have used have helped us wrestle with some of these thorny questions. The sclr and Assess and Assist models allow partners the space to utilise CVA on their own terms. More importantly, the processes used for these approaches help reset the delicate balance between international standards in key areas, such as inclusion, accountability, and safeguarding, and locally led programmatic solutions.

### Possible learning and research opportunities

Should the terms and concepts above be adopted, there are a range of learning and research opportunities. Much will be about codifying what already exists. For example, the risks of locally led response are well known, but a codified rebuttal with evidence would be useful. Annex 1 is our current thinking on this issue, but more can be unpacked. Likewise, more effort should be placed on understanding endogenous responses. Local actor coordination networks and the total value of mutual aid are currently hidden to many in the international system, but a greater understanding of these may help donors trust locally led responses more implicitly, making the risks associated with them mitigable and not 'deal breakers'.

Overall, the CVA community should treat the barriers to funding locally led response in the same way as they previously treated objections to CVA in general. This paper has categorised the key assumptions that need rebutting in order to build confidence for more direct funding, and we would recommend the following three priority areas for further investigation:

- Research into local actor coordination models that exist outside of the international humanitarian sector, and how they could be relied upon by those funding locally led response.
- Research into whether locally led response can offer more tailored transfer mechanisms than institutional CVA, and the compliance challenges of selecting financial service providers primarily upon recipient request.

- Research to assess the role CVA currently plays in mutual aid and locally led responses, and to compare this to more institutional CVA.

### New funding models and structural changes

- Within the current structure, CWGs can consider incorporating community based interventions (CBI), often linked to group cash transfers, into their remit. However, this is a stop gap until wider reform allows for locally led response to have a more formal 'space'.
- There are plenty of examples of iterative reform outlined in the *State of the World's Cash* report, but there is also an opportunity to be bolder and argue for new structures, either within or beyond donor organisations. The Flagship Initiative and other area-based models offer a good starting point for discussion.
- A global fund to help channel money to locally led responses could help compound the current initiatives, but the main aim is for institutional donors to recognise that locally led response is an approach on its own and should have different tools, standards, and processes applied to it.

## Annex 1: Perceived risks associated with locally led response

Risk	Assumptions and current evidence	Evidence gaps
<p><b>Will supply create demand?</b> If new funding is available to local actors and mutual aid providers will it distort current efforts rather than contribute to the collective efforts.</p>	<p>This is a legitimate concern but through strong processes (appreciative inquiry, understanding power and conflict dynamics etc) the risk can be mitigated. The risk should be one that is 'mitigated' and not 'prohibitive' to opening funding channels.</p>	<p>This is not seen as an evidence gap, but Christian Aid is open to discussions with specific donors on how our approaches could help them see locally led response as a specialty to help them create structures that allow for funding in this way.</p>
<p><b>Will new funding streams to locally led response lead to fragmentation and a loss of coordination?</b> If each local actor can design CVA uniquely will issues of different models lead to conflict? Can coverage be guaranteed?</p>	<p>Local actors have pre-existing or spontaneous coordination efforts. The international system is often a duplication of these efforts for local actors.</p> <p>Lack of harmonised reporting is not the same as a lack of coordination of activities on the ground.</p>	<p>Deeper understanding of how local actors coordinate. (It is understood that ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) is working on this). Examples of how they report to different authorities and also perform processes of spontaneous deduplication and inclusive targeting.</p>
<p><b>Will the transaction costs associated with new funding streams to locally led response outweigh the current 'intermediary based' approach?</b> Would donors opening up funding streams directly to local and national actors for mutual aid top ups, as opposed to localisation, reduce aid efficiency?</p>	<p>Given the challenges with tracking CVA, little is known about the true amount of CVA local actors implement. However, in terms of overheads ShareTrust's Passing the Buck study (2022) shows how financially efficient local actors can be.</p> <p>Also, reshaping the role of the intermediary might also reduce the level of costs they 'extract' in the process. Some may even move out of the funding chain, but still offer different models of partnership. International intermediaries are heterogeneous in this respect.</p>	<p>Current efficiency debates are often tied to economies of scale. How do diffuse funding models to many local actors compare with harmonised consortia approaches?</p>
<p><b>How will issues of power and elites be overcome? And how will questions of humanitarian</b></p>	<p>Supporting locally led response more internationally, and reducing due diligence, does not mean there are no checks</p>	<p>This is not seen as an evidence gap, but Christian Aid is open to discussions with specific donors on how our approaches could</p>

**neutrality be addressed?** A lot of reticence over direct funding to local actors is the perception that they may not be neutral or impartial. As such they might exclude vulnerable groups or support combatants as well as civilians.

whatsoever. It is possible to produce mutual partnerships where values and principles remain. Refocusing to a partnership cycle and approach away from a more rigid compliance-based approach alleviates this concern. And by working on horizontal accountability (to communities) as well as vertical accountability (to donors), these approaches can address concerns around elites and neutrality.

help them see locally led response as a specialty to help them create structures that allow for funding in this way.

**How will other internationally led crosscutting standards be upheld?** How do we deal with the paradox of light touch due diligence with the myriad technical cross cutting concerns such as; safeguarding, accountability, environment, inclusion, conflict sensitivity, financial compliance, data protection etc?

There are broadly three categories of standards; technical (often engineering quality, technical testing of products etc), Quality (linked to the Core Humanitarian Standards, focusing on accountability, inclusion, and safeguarding), and financial compliance. By simplifying financial compliance, and trusting local solutions, the greater partnership emphasis can be placed on locally led quality standards.

There is ongoing work from Charter for Change on Due Diligence Passporting (Humentum 2024) among other initiatives.

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## Endnotes

<sup>23</sup>Endnotes from references in footnotes and figures.

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