

Better understanding local leaders and coalitions as drivers of change

by Lisa Denney

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Youth leaders create and share videos countering misinformation, and learn about elections through role-play in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2024

Photo Credit: YLKIS

Over the last decade, there has been a growing emphasis on the power of local leaders and coalitions as **drivers of developmental change**. The Australian government's **2023 International Development Policy** emphasises supporting “local coalitions to achieve positive systemic change” (p. 32). Coalitions are a key component of “locally led development” — as local drivers of change in their own social and political environments. DFAT's recent **Guidance Note on Locally Led Development** pinpoints supporting local leaders and coalitions as a key commitment of the Australian aid program.

We also see this recognition of the potential role of local leaders and coalitions in driving developmental change in DFAT's investments in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. A range of programs focus on supporting the emergence of local leaders, coalitions or collective action to drive reform.

For instance, **Coalitions for Change** in the Philippines identifies policy reforms ripe for change and brings together reform-minded individuals to act collectively to achieve change. **The Voice Inc.** in Papua New Guinea also identifies reform-minded individuals and connects them with others to identify and progress reform on areas they see as priorities. The Asia Foundation's Democratic Resilience program in Indonesia supports the emergence of coalitions at the subnational level to engage with policymakers to improve service delivery. And **Balance of Power** in the Pacific works sensitively to progress women's political participation by working with allies to get issues of women's leadership on the agenda.

This collection of investments (those above, and others) appears to add up to an emerging **strategy or “bet”** that DFAT is pursuing in its development assistance portfolio: that supporting local leaders and coalitions can advance developmental change. This sits alongside other strategies, such as building the institutional capacity of the state, support to civil society, multilateral investments, and so on. And yet each program also takes unique approaches to how coalitions and

collective action are thought about and supported — there is diversity within the overarching bet.

While Coalitions for Change starts with a reform issue that appears “ripe” for change and builds a “fit-for-purpose” coalition from there, The Voice Inc. starts with reform-minded people and identifies reform topics that those leaders prioritise. This may or may not align with DFAT’s identified reform priorities in-country. Programs such as [Balance of Power](#), [Women Leading and Influencing](#) and the [Vanuatu Skills Partnership](#) begin from a more specific starting point, focused on issues of gender equity, women’s leadership and growing the national skills-base respectively. In addition, some programs support coalitions in a more hands-off way, while others are in themselves local leaders and part of the coalition. Some are focused on achieving policy change while others are working towards social-norm changes.

What is interesting is that while these programs have all, to varying degrees, captured learning from their own experience, there has not been any aggregate learning across programs. Given the significant investments in “leaders” and “coalitions” across the aid portfolio, as well as possible growth in this area as a result of policy commitments to greater support for locally led development, it seems like an opportune moment to reflect on what is being learned at a portfolio level.

This seeks to address a challenge within the Australian aid program I’ve written about [earlier on Devpolicy Blog](#), related to a lack of institutional incentives to capture learning about different strategies for how change happens. Picking up on this, [Cameron Hill has also pointed](#) to an absence of explicit reflection on how change happens at the country level within Development Partnership Plans. It is also notable that the [International Development Policy](#) (p. 49) makes a commitment to strengthening the evidence base underpinning programming and to enhance evaluation and learning, including through increasing sectoral and thematic reviews.

To address this in one small way, the [Centre for Human Security and Social Change](#) at La Trobe University, in collaboration with DFAT, is commencing a learning journey on Coalitions and Local Leaders for Change ([CALL4Change Learning Journey](#)). This brings together six DFAT investments to collectively unpack the diversity of approaches to local leaders and coalitions; how they are supported by an external aid program; and what is being learned about their contribution to developmental change in different contexts and working on different issues.

Running over two years, our research will document the diversity and common themes in the ways programs operate, as well as how local leaders and coalitions experience support from external actors. The research will produce a [mapping of DFAT investments](#) in this space (also available as [a briefing paper](#)) and draw out

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good practice recommendations to inform the design, implementation and evaluation of programs supporting local leaders and coalitions. The programs involved include: Balance of Power in Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu; Coalitions for Change in the Philippines; Reclaiming Civic Space to Promote Democratic Resilience Program in Indonesia; The Voice Inc. in PNG; Vanuatu Skills Partnership and Women Leading and Influencing which covers the Pacific region.

The **learning journey approach**, building on the Institute for Development Studies' use of this methodology in the **Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development Program**, offers the opportunity for the practitioners involved to shape the focus of the research as learning emerges. This aims to address a gap in the Australian international development ecosystem, identified in a **Devpolicy blog by Graham Teskey**, between practitioners and academics engaging on ideas, concepts and theories.

By bringing together a range of coalition programs, as well as a mix of practitioners, policymakers and researchers, we hope the collaboration will nurture greater curiosity in local leaders and coalitions as a pathway to change. Not only should this provide a better understanding of the diverse ways in which change can happen but also inform decisions about what role programming supporting local leaders and coalitions can play within a spread of strategies for change being pursued within the aid program.

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Author/s:

Lisa Denney

Lisa Denney is a principal research fellow and Director of the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University and a research associate with ODI.

Link:

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