

Useful outsiders – how can external actors support authentic locally led development?

by Anna Gibert

15 July 2021



Vanuatu Skills Partnership strategic planning session

Photo Credit: Anna Gibert

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated border closures have thrown the international development industry into turmoil. An industry conventionally reliant on ‘fly-in fly-out’ consultants has had to face a reckoning in terms of the sustainability of its *modus operandi*.

Central to this reckoning is a renewed focus on localisation. While this is welcome, and something called for over many years in the Pacific by increasing numbers of **Pacific Islander voices**, there are also concerns that the pivoting to more ‘localised’ ways of working will only occur at a superficial level; that the power structures entrenched in the customary donor–beneficiary narrative will remain firmly in place, with decision-making still in **outsiders’ hands**, simply being exercised through a **‘remote control’ modality**.

In light of these concerns, it is timely to interrogate what truly localised development cooperation looks like, and what deeper, structural changes are needed to enable external actors to play a useful role in this reconceptualised process. This blog makes a number of suggestions for such external actors – donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), managing contractors – to consider. It is informed by my own long-term experiences supporting the **Vanuatu Skills Partnership** and the **Balance of Power** initiative (both DFAT funded) before and during COVID-19 as a non-Pacific Islander consultant. Both these initiatives have been **documented** as unconventional, stand-out examples of authentic locally led development.

Firstly, it is very difficult for external actors to be useful to another country’s development without a reassessment of, and lucidity around, what genuine

development is and how it happens. Unfortunately, the projectisation of ‘development’ by non-local actors – however well meaning – has meant that the practices and power dynamics of this industry, particularly in the Pacific, foster an illusionary sense that outsiders can actually bring about another nation’s development, whether as donors, contractors or expatriate advisers.

As a case in point, the endemic use of the phrase ‘deliver development outcomes’ in program designs and contracts reveals a misplaced belief that external technical inputs will be the main factor in determining internal power shifts that drive complex social change – which is what development essentially is.

Accordingly, before one even gets to the practical steps of being a ‘useful outsider’, I would argue that the very first precondition is to constantly check in on one’s own humility: as a potential partner to a social change movement in another country and culture, are my actions and attitudes reflecting the reality that I am not the driver nor the main player in this process?

Once the awareness of this reality is in place, the next step in being useful is realising that much of the projectisation of development needs to be *actively worked against*, or at least managed, in order to enable the local dynamism, creativity and political manoeuvring that is required for sustainable social change to occur.

One of the great bureaucratic impediments to this local leadership and dynamism in aid programs of the West – where the written word is so highly privileged – is the need to demonstrate outcomes and progress in the language of the donor, framed in ways that resonate with the incentives of the donor’s political economy. Habitually, leadership legitimacy is based upon an ability to meet these external bureaucratic requirements, rather than on the essential skills to savvily navigate the local political economy to convene and influence coalitions for reform and institutional power shifting.

When I am asked what I do in my support roles to the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and Balance of Power, I often respond that a big part of my job is being a secretary. This is not faux humility; I know that in the context of international cooperation utilising billions of taxpayer dollars, being able to articulate what a program is doing in ways that are resonant with the donor is crucial for accountability and public diplomacy. But I also know that an ability to write an elegant annual plan, MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) framework or 6-monthly progress report is completely secondary to the local thinking, relationship-building, and inherent drive that these are based upon.

These are qualities that the Pacific Islander leaders of the two initiatives that I work

with, Fremden Yanhambath, Mereani Rokotuibau and Jennifer Kalpokas Doan, are always going to have in abundantly more quantity than any expatriate consultant like me.

But there is a useful role that external actors can play here, in deconstructing and deprioritising the primacy of such superficial markers of power within the development industry. We can use our power within the donors' political economy to draw attention to these real drivers of development, and use our bureaucratic skills to ensure that they are protected from counterproductive incentives and pressures.

Linked to this, as an external actor on a development program, one can also be useful in influencing the function of the program to protect and foster **developmental leadership**. History clearly shows that the basis of social change is the power of leadership and coalitions of influence, and whether it is positive social change rather than negative depends on whether leaders of influence are developmentally motivated or self-serving.

The reality is that, in the countries ostensibly requiring international aid, developmental leaders are not often those in power; poor leadership and governance lie at the root of most development problems. However, the only way that these leadership models will change is if negative power and ways of working are contested by other positive forms of power and positive ways of doing things – and if these have buy-in and groundswell support from local stakeholders.

So, what does this mean for an outsider? However regrettable, the reality is that outsiders often have more power than locals in development industry recruitment. They should use this privilege to prioritise engagement of local leaders. Obviously, this means ensuring locals are leading and managing development initiatives. But to recruit for *developmental* leadership also means rethinking our criteria for these positions.

Conventional management recruitment processes don't naturally elicit the qualities of leaders who value the empowering of others before themselves, and state-building before personal interests. In addition to bureaucratic skills, selection of senior positions is often biased to equate confidence, dominance and performance charisma with good leadership. Yet the qualities of those motivated to serve and deliver results for others – humility, sensitivity, altruism, collaboration – **don't often correlate with these**, and identifying those who possess them takes much more care and insight.

Moreover, drivers of positive social change aren't usually waiting around for a project to hire them to 'do development', and working on self-promoting CVs; they

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are far too occupied being intrinsically focused on bringing change to their communities, schools, churches, governments and local organisations.

As outsiders, we have an opportunity to see and value these green shoots of reformist action and to see – and ask – whether we can further amplify their actions and values through our support. This also means ensuring we don't 'de-localise' reformist momentum – we don't remove these local leaders from their networks and coalition-building through establishing parallel 'projects'; we use additional external resources and support to strengthen *what they are already doing*. And when these developmental leaders are at the helm of reform initiatives – people like Fremden, Mereani and Jennifer – we should then use our roles to further promote the alternative forms of leadership that they stand for, and amplify the power of their influence and contestation of the status quo for sustainable, authentic social change.

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Link:

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