

# XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

## LOCALISATION OF RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE GENERATION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED BORDERLANDS: REVIEW OF THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK

BRIEFING NOTE | MARCH 2025

### BACKGROUND

The X-Border Local Research Network (LRN) was founded with a bold ambition: shift the research paradigm from extractive models to one rooted in local leadership, capacity, and ownership. Recognising that meaningful participation and locally driven research are critical to generating impactful evidence, FCDO (formerly DFID) and programme partners The Asia Foundation (TAF), Rift Valley Institute (RVI), and Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center (CMEC) sought to challenge traditional research structures—where external actors commission studies without investing in local capacity—and instead foster a more equitable approach to knowledge generation.

Established in 2018 under the UK government-funded Cross-border Conflict Evidence, Policy, and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, the LRN addresses critical knowledge gaps in conflict-affected border regions across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The LRN promotes capacity support and exchange, elevates local leadership in research and evidence generation, and contributes to a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of conflict dynamics.



## ABOUT THIS BRIEFING NOTE

This briefing note distills key lessons from the review of the LRN<sup>1</sup> to help donors, such as FCDO, and other research actors to support locally led research. It serves as a practical guide, offering concrete approaches from the LRN's experience alongside broader resources on equitable knowledge and evidence production. It highlights the nuances of supporting locally led research in conflict settings – where power dynamics, funding structures, and operational constraints present distinct challenges. This note is not intended to comprehensively address all issues or capture every example of locally led research in diverse contexts and challenging environments.

The lessons and approaches are divided into different stages of the research cycle:



This briefing note is framed around the following points for each research stage.

- ▶ What success looks like – the vision for each stage of the research cycle
- ▶ What shifts need to happen – key behavioural and structural changes that need to change
- ▶ Lessons from the LRN's approach – practical examples and challenges drawn from the experience of the LRN
- ▶ Key considerations – guiding questions for research funders such as FCDO as well as other research actors

1 The review, commissioned by TAF and undertaken by Humanitarian Advisory Group in partnership with GLOW Consultants, examines LRN's achievements during the whole programme timeline and contributions to policy and programme change, while also identifying opportunities to sustain and expand its role.



## Key terms used

**Global North and Global South:** The terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' are polarising and contested. They depend on oversimplified binaries such as 'developed' and 'developing', 'high income' and 'low income'. They do not capture the complexity and diversity within and between countries that can reinforce systems of power, governance and dependence. Within the LRN, there is no adopted definition of the terms Global North and Global South.

We acknowledge the flaws in using these terms, including the profound differences between countries in each category. At the same time, not all countries considered part of the Global South are affected by conflict and crisis. Some actors may also not identify with these categories or may represent both Global South and North institutions. We believe, however, that these distinctions are important because of the structural inequalities and power differentials that affect knowledge production and access.<sup>2</sup>

**Local:** We use the term 'local' where relevant to recognise that Global South partners are not always based in the research country context. Within the LRN, the use of the term 'local' has been fluid and adapted to each context specifically. In this brief, local is defined as researchers and institutions based and operating within the local context of reference, subject to local laws, and whose work is centred on and engages with local communities.

## APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING LOCALLY LED RESEARCH IN CONFLICT SETTINGS



### 1. Co-developing the research agenda with local researchers and communities

**What success could look like:** Research priorities are co-developed with local researchers and communities in study sites. Traditional power imbalances (i.e. external researchers imposing research agendas) when commissioning research are actively addressed.

**What shifts need to happen?** Research questions, priorities, and approaches are often imposed rather than co-designed. A shift towards a collaborative model is needed, where local experiences and co-identified knowledge gaps shape the agenda from the outset.

#### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ During XCEPT's inception, the three programme partners intentionally challenged the traditional research model, which is often top-down and extractive. There was an explicit discussion on how to ensure that XCEPT research was led by, and for, local actors rather than externally driven.
- ▶ Programme partners fostered an inclusive research agenda by ensuring that local researchers led or co-led studies. New programme areas were selected together with local partners, assessed for their feasibility and relevance for understanding local dynamics and the big picture context. Programme partners took the role of consolidating different research themes to ensure that these aligned with the broader objectives of XCEPT.
- ▶ Programme partners adopted funding and project structures which allowed for iterative, flexible approaches that adapt to local needs. This included allowing research questions to be refined based on shifts in the conflict context (i.e. new developments). When research priorities shifted, partners ensured transparent communication about why there were changes and discussed how local researchers could redirect efforts towards related areas of inquiry.
- ▶ Lessons have also been learned on how local researchers can build relationships with policymakers, particularly donors, to better connect with and respond to their evidence needs.

2 F Carden, T Hanley and A Peterson, From knowing to doing: Evidence use in the humanitarian sector, Elrha Learning Paper (2021)

'Within the LRN, I experienced the freedom to explore themes that interested me, drawing from our ongoing research. This autonomy led me to write the [report name], a project where I received guidance and mentorship from directors and colleagues who supported my work and helped shape its direction' (LRN member, interview).



### Key considerations:

- What mechanisms ensure local priorities are reflected in research commissioning?
- Do local researchers have the space to provide feedback on the TOR and is there room to adjust based on their feedback?
- What models exist for co-governance of research priorities between donors and local actors?
- Who is involved in decision-making in relation to the need for and direction of the proposed research?



## 2. Embedding capacity exchange opportunities

**What success could look like:** Researchers, particularly those from the Global South, have equitable access to mentorship, funding, and leadership opportunities. Capacity exchange is mutual, recognising that expertise exists across different contexts rather than assuming a one-way knowledge transfer from Global North to South.

**What shifts need to happen?** Donors and research institutions often prioritise the delivery of research outputs without making meaningful investments in local research ecosystems. Additionally, a persistent mindset equates capacity with Global North expertise, which overlooks the expertise and strengths of local researchers and those from the Global South. Capacity strengthening initiatives must move away from a deficit-based model of capacity-building which assumes that local researchers lack capacity, to a trust-based approach that acknowledges and builds on diverse forms of expertise.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ Intentional capacity support for local and Global South actors was embedded from the start as a core focus of the XCEPT programme. Throughout XCEPT, programme partners have balanced the dual demands of producing high-quality research outputs while also providing meaningful capacity-strengthening support to local researchers—both of which require sustained effort and resources.
- ▶ Programme partners' research partnerships prioritised long-term engagement with local and Global South researchers, rather than one-off collaborations that leave local researchers without continued support or opportunities to build workstreams and grow engagement over time.
- ▶ Intentional processes were established to track progress and impact of capacity-strengthening initiatives and tailor support accordingly. For example, the review found that while early-career researchers benefitted most from applied research experience, more experienced researchers found some training opportunities less relevant to their needs, highlighting the importance of differentiated support.



## Key considerations:

- What funding models can be developed to support long-term capacity strengthening, rather than short-term projects? Have resources been allocated for capacity strengthening initiatives that can support local researchers in the delivery of outputs?
- How can research programmes incentivise and support the growth of local researchers?
- How can mentorship structures be designed to be mutually beneficial rather than hierarchical?
- What mindsets and behaviours among the team need to shift to recognise and value the expertise of local researchers, rather than operating with a deficit-based perspective?



## 3. More inclusive approaches to developing research proposals and awarding contracts

**What success could look like:** Research proposal review and contract award processes meaningfully engage researchers from the Global South, ensuring diverse representation in decision-making panels. Funding and selection criteria prioritise equity, inclusivity, and contextual expertise.

**What shifts need to happen?** The research proposal review and contracting processes that are often dominated by Global North institutions and experts need to change. This Global North led approach limits opportunities for researchers in the Global South specifically to shape research agendas and funding decisions. Selection criteria favouring highly-experienced researchers or organisations with existing international recognition or administrative capacity create barriers for smaller, locally led research institutions.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ Some programme partners deliberately worked with experienced but less globally recognised organisations that had limited administrative capacity. Instead of favoring institutions with strong grant management systems, they broadened selection criteria to include smaller, locally led research organisations. To support their success, partners provided targeted assistance to strengthen administrative processes, enabling them to manage the funding from XCEPT effectively.
- ▶ When calls were put out for the Women Research Fellows, early-career women researchers were prioritised, receiving mentorship, tailored capacity-strengthening support, and opportunities to lead research projects.



## Key considerations:

- What changes in selection criteria and eligibility requirements can better support locally led research institutions?
- What adjustments in contracting and compliance requirements could make funding more accessible to smaller, locally embedded research organisations, particularly those navigating restrictions and security challenges? For example, are there any procurement frameworks and organisational policies that do not allow for direct engagement with partners from the Global South?
- How can research funding processes ensure diverse representation in proposal review and contract awarding?



#### 4. Designing ethical and context-sensitive methodologies with local researchers and communities

**What success could look like:** Research methodologies are co-developed, leveraging the skills and expertise of all research collaborators. They prioritise ethical considerations, inclusivity, and conflict sensitivity to ensure that data collection is rigorous, respectful, and contextually appropriate.

**What shifts need to happen?** A shift from data collection methods that are extractive, inappropriate, or ineffective towards approaches where local researchers and crisis-affected communities have space and agency in shaping research methodologies.

##### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ Trust-based and collegial partnerships between programme partners and their local research collaborators facilitated the co-development of methodologies and research protocols. Local researchers played a central role in shaping research approaches to ensure they were contextually appropriate. This included prioritising ethical and conflict-sensitive methods and ensuring that the research process did not exacerbate risks for researchers or participants.
- ▶ Flexibility in adapting methodologies allowed for real-time adjustments based on challenges and developments in the field, discussed collaboratively between programme partners and their local research collaborators. This ensured responsiveness to evolving local contexts, emerging risks, and shifting research needs.
- ▶ Some of the LRN research published through XCEPT actively incorporated qualitative and participatory research approaches, recognising the limits of surveys and quantitative methods in capturing the depth of lived experiences in conflict settings. For example, community-led methodologies were applied in Rohingya contexts, and oral history methods were used in South Sudan.



##### Key considerations:

- How can you collaborate with Global South and local researchers to assess whether community engagement or data collection is necessary, beneficial, and appropriate?
- Are certain research methods used predominantly, and if so, what are the reasons behind this reliance (e.g., familiarity, donor preferences, resource availability)? Can you explore alternative approaches to diversify research methods while maintaining rigor and relevance?
- What ethical considerations need to be addressed to ensure conflict-sensitive and responsible methodology development?



## 5. Ensuring collaborative and locally led data collection and analysis processes

**What success could look like:** Data collection and analysis processes are collaborative and all researchers ensure that research findings are contextually grounded and directly benefit conflict-affected communities.

**What shifts need to happen?** Data collection and analysis processes can be extractive and externally driven, with local researchers primarily involved as data collectors rather than analysts or knowledge producers. This must shift towards a truly collaborative approach, where all contributors leverage each other's skills and strengths in shaping research design, analysis, and interpretation.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ Local researchers led data collection, ensuring culturally appropriate methods that responded to community needs. Researchers' strong local connections, cultural understanding, and language expertise have been central to the LRN's ability to engage a diverse range of people and communities – many of which external stakeholders would struggle to access. Researchers were properly resourced and received training where needed, including on data collection methods, ethical considerations, and risk management.
- ▶ Research teams met regularly to review progress, refine analysis, and structure findings. These discussions enabled collective sense-making, where all researchers could challenge interpretations, refine key messages, and strengthen findings. For early-career researchers, this process enhanced skills in framing analysis and linking findings to broader relevance.
- ▶ Some research initiatives incorporated community-led validation. For example, TAF engaged a class of Rohingya research volunteers, through focus group discussions and group work activities, to critically review content for the Rohingya Stories platform, to make sure that research findings were accurate, representative, and reflective of lived experiences.



### Key considerations:

- For research leads, how can local researchers be properly supported to lead data collection and analysis, rather than just contributing raw data?
- What safeguards and ethical measures are needed to protect researchers and participants especially with the security and access challenges in conflict-affected areas?
- What systems can be put in place to ensure regular feedback loops, where communities and local researchers review preliminary findings and contribute to interpretation?
- Do you have a direct line with local researchers to sense-check findings?



## 6. Centering local researchers' recognition and visibility in research outputs

**What success could look like:** Research outputs are collaboratively produced, with local researchers leading or co-authoring publications, ensuring shared ownership, visibility, and recognition.

**What shifts need to happen?** Practices where research outputs are often finalised by Global North institutions, with local researchers contributing primarily to data collection rather than authorship or dissemination, must shift. Instead, collaborative authorship and shared ownership, where local researchers play a central role in shaping, writing, and communicating research findings, should be prioritised.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ 82% of LRN research outputs were led or co-led by local researchers and Global South partners. Local researchers played a central role in knowledge production and authorship, and were credited in the result, as well as leading public dissemination.
- ▶ Programme partners provided technical and editorial support while emphasising the need to keep local researchers' voices central throughout the writing and editing process. This involved ensuring that edits refined arguments without diluting local perspectives, and that local researchers had final sign-off on how their contributions were represented.
- ▶ Research outputs were designed not only for academic and policy audiences, but were also made accessible to research informants through community summaries.

'One of the problems for UK-funded research in peace and conflict is seeing researchers as outsourced data collectors only, and then the design and authorship is left with UK-based researchers. So here, having local researchers as lead authors is very important.' (FCDO representative, interview)



### Key considerations:

- How can research outputs be produced in a way that gives full recognition to local researchers? Where and how is credit given to local contributors?
- Do you need to build in time or financial resources to develop other research outputs in other formats (e.g. short briefs) or translate the product as needed?
- For peer reviewers and editors, how can editing and feedback processes ensure that local perspectives and voices remain central in final outputs while meeting quality expectations and standards?





## 7. Making research outputs accessible to diverse groups including local communities

**What success could look like:** Research findings are proactively shared in formats that are accessible, relevant, and actionable for diverse audiences, particularly those who contributed data and are most affected by conflict and crisis.

**What shifts need to happen:** Research must not be limited to academic and donor circles, without reaching local actors, policymakers, and crisis-affected populations who could benefit from the findings. Dissemination strategies need to strike a balance—ensuring research meets academic and policy objectives, while also being accessible and useful to those directly impacted. Diversifying audiences and including more local dissemination may also strengthen uptake of the research findings and recommendations.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ The LRN actively disseminated findings through trusted local channels, including community networks and media outlets, to ensure research reached the people it aimed to serve. Local researchers were encouraged to present findings to key decision-makers and practitioners, strengthening their influence in shaping policy. Where LRN outputs were translated into local languages, their impact and uptake increased exponentially.
- ▶ Beyond authorship, local researchers played a prominent role in presenting findings at national and international forums which reinforced their credibility and influence in policy and academic debates. Programme partners played a crucial role in prioritising the participation of local researchers in dissemination events, including supporting travel costs and visa processes, which must be factored into dissemination strategies.
- ▶ The LRN recognised that beyond producing tailored research outputs, local researchers should have opportunities to engage directly with policymakers and practitioners from the outset of the research process—particularly during the design phase—to enhance the relevance and uptake of research findings down the track. However, this remained a challenge in some contexts.



### Key considerations:

- What channels and networks can be leveraged to ensure evidence informs decision-making and action? Are local/national pathways in the regions of study also considered in the dissemination strategy?
- How can findings be shared through participatory methods, ensuring that those affected by crises can engage with and use the research?
- What resources and funding are needed to support local researchers' participation in dissemination events, including travel and networking opportunities?



## 8. Reviewing the research process and collaboration with local researchers and partners

**What success could look like:** Research processes and collaborations are regularly reviewed and adapted based on feedback from local researchers and partners. Collaborators are working towards more equitable, transparent, and mutually beneficial ways of working.

**What shifts need to happen?** In one-off engagements, local researchers may not have opportunities to provide feedback on how collaborations function or how equitable they feel. There needs to be a shift towards intentional and trust-based process, where local researchers are invited to openly share their experiences, challenges, and recommendations—without fear of repercussions.

### Lessons from the LRN's approach:

- ▶ Throughout XCEPT, programme partners' commitment to equity meant ensuring local researchers had decision-making power and were recognised as equal partners rather than subcontractors.
- ▶ Programme partners worked on developing trust-based relationships, where feedback was actively encouraged and acted upon, rather than seen as a formality. There was a recognition that collaboration is an evolving process which requires continuous dialogue and long-term engagement.
- ▶ The complexity of research themes covered in XCEPT required long-term commitment and sustained engagement with research partners. Programme partners recognised that the difficult issues and sensitive research topics they tackle in conflict-affected borderlands require a long-term view. Similarly, developing meaningful partnerships takes time, and investing in these relationships over several years has been key to the LRN's success.

**'If we felt like the partnership was not equal or maybe if there was some kind of unequal partnership or mistreatment, definitely the partnership wouldn't have continued. This is the reason why the partnership continued.'** (LRN member, interview)



### Key considerations:

- mechanisms can ensure that local researchers feel comfortable providing honest feedback without concerns about funding or partnerships being affected? How do you recognise and address power imbalances in collaborations?
- How can you use your existing relationships or contacts with Global South actors to inform or change your partnership approaches?
- What kind of investment is needed for the partnership to be balanced, respectful and mutually beneficial? Do you have the resources to ensure a certain standard of equity can be met?

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**Photo source:** Sunset view from Karoit, Nandi Hills, looking down from the escarpment into the Great Rift Valley. Kenya, Africa. Jen Watson / Shutterstock

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