



The Decision Mapping Tool:

Understanding 'local' decision-making
in aid interventions

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Under the 'localisation' agenda, the aid sector is increasingly discussing the importance of shifting decision-making power to local actors. This policy brief presents an innovative new Decision Mapping Tool (DMAT) that can help practitioners to pursue this agenda. Pilots of the DMAT demonstrate its value in facilitating systematic reflection on decision-making power in aid interventions. The DMAT can help practitioners to support localisation efforts in both humanitarian and development programmes.

Key messages

- With growing attention paid to localisation in the aid sector, understanding and reflecting on the allocation of decision-making power is increasingly important.
- The DMAT can be used to facilitate a process of reflection on the allocation of decision-making power within aid interventions, as demonstrated through pilots in Kenya and India.
- By demarcating three different 'Decision Spaces', the DMAT promotes greater recognition of the role and importance of the Local Decision Space, where local actors have autonomy over decisions that affect them.
- Localisation efforts often focus on the Partnership Decision Space, but this can risk reinforcing existing power dynamics and overlooking the role of the Local Decision Space.

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Local decision-making in aid

There has been increasing attention to the importance of 'localisation' within the aid sector, to the extent that it has been described as the latest ['buzzword'](#). There are many different ways to define the purpose and goals of localisation: from an [increase in resources going directly](#) to local organisations, to ['shifting the power'](#) through yielding greater autonomy to local actors, to respecting their ['ways of being'](#).

And as Baguios et al (2021) argue, these three elements do not necessarily appear together. In particular, while progress on shifting resources to local actors remains slow, even localisation efforts which do so may fail to actually shift power to local decision-makers. If donors and their implementing partners retain decision-making authority, then existing power dynamics can be sustained, even when local organisations are directly funded.

A key issue which pervades the discussion of localisation is the question of ['who is local?'](#). Roger Mac Ginty's 'critical localism' (2015) attempts to decouple the 'local' from the 'international' or 'global' by expanding its definition beyond geographical location. Mac Ginty emphasises that 'local' is not a static category, but 'changes with time and circumstances' and, while it may reflect territorial characteristics, it may also be 'extra-territorial' (2015: 851).

Meanwhile, Maia King's research (2020) shows how space for local agency and decision-making in aid interventions can be important for many beneficial reasons, including legitimacy, accountability, learning, coordination, and mobilisation. In contrast, if decision-making is 'entangled' within partnerships, this can lead to harm in these same areas. This research highlights the need to distinguish between programmatic decisions that are made within the 'Local Decision Space', where local actors have autonomy, and those which are made within the 'Partnership Decision Space', where decisions are negotiated between local actors, partners and intermediaries.

In this policy brief, we present a new facilitation tool to support localisation efforts, the Decision Mapping Tool (DMAT). Building on Maia King's research, our team has developed and piloted the DMAT, transforming an initial idea into a practical tool for practitioners.

The tool has been developed through an iterative process of design, testing, and improvement, informed by four pilots in different settings in Kenya and India and a workshop seeking feedback from practitioners. The findings from this process, presented in this policy brief, demonstrate the potential value of the DMAT for supporting localisation efforts.

What is the DMAT?

The DMAT provides a way for practitioners to explore decision-making power across the programme cycle of a given aid intervention. It is designed to enable a process of inclusive reflection amongst programme actors on the allocation of this decision-making power, and the extent to which this power is 'localised'. Aligning with the discourse on critical localism, the DMAT does not objectively define 'who is local' in a given context, but rather provides space for practitioners to discuss this question in a context-relevant way.

The DMAT focuses on a single dimension of localisation: decision-making. Decision-making is a fundamental and practical way to understand power and agency in aid relationships (Elbers and Schulpen, 2011; King, 2020).

This exclusive focus on decision-making in the DMAT helps practitioners to explore and reflect on the ways in which power is distributed and managed in aid interventions.

And while partnerships are pervasive in aid, the DMAT provides an innovative approach to exploring decision-making power, by also bringing attention to the many important decisions that can be made outside the partnership context.

This insight points to three broad '[Decision Spaces](#)', which are defined by the set of actors that are included or excluded from the decision-making process, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The DMAT comprises three decision spaces

These three decision spaces are:

- The **Local Decision Space**, where local actors (including state, non-state, formal and informal organisations, community groups, and individual stakeholders) make decisions among themselves with no direct interaction with external partners;
- The **Partnership Decision Space**, where local actors, external actors and intermediaries (including INGOs and private suppliers) negotiate decisions between themselves, often within partnership arrangements; and
- The **External Decision Space**, where external actors (including donors, philanthropists, corporate foundations, and other international organisations) make decisions among themselves, without involving local partners or intermediaries.

The DMAT provides a method for practitioners to explore decision-making within both development and humanitarian programmes. Through an inclusive process of mapping, reflection and discussion, the tool enables constructive conversations about the allocation of decision-making power within a given intervention. The demarcation of three Decision Spaces lays out a useful and intuitive structure for these conversations.

It can also support discussion on the context-specific question of 'who is local', as part of the process.

There are many useful tools that can support localisation efforts (Baguios et al, 2021; Partos, 2020; Teskey & Chattier, 2022; WeRobotics, 2022). The DMAT is distinct in three key ways, as shown in Figure 2.

What is distinct about the DMAT?

- 1. Focuses on the practice of decision-making** as a way to understand the allocation of power within programming contexts.
- 2. Deepens the mapping beyond partnerships**, acknowledging that local actors may make decisions without involving external actors, and vice versa.
- 3. Enables a process of reflection and discussion** that is inclusive and constructive, particularly for marginalised groups, and highlights issues of positionality.

Figure 2. The DMAT is distinct in three key ways

How is the DMAT used in practice?

There are two stages in the use of the DMAT: A) mapping and B) reflection. While the DMAT provides the structure for the content of these stages, they can be carried out using a variety of different methods including workshops, focus group discussions, or one-on-one interviews with the different stakeholders in a given aid intervention. Stakeholders could include, for example, different local actors, the implementing agency(ies), programme evaluators, any other partners, and the funder(s)/donor(s).

Stage A: Mapping: The first stage is to map out decision-making within a given aid intervention. Many different decisions may be relevant, as shown in Figure 3.

The structure of the DMAT comprises six broad decision-making areas, based on a typical project or programme cycle. These are: goals; design; delivery; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); funding; and exit strategy.

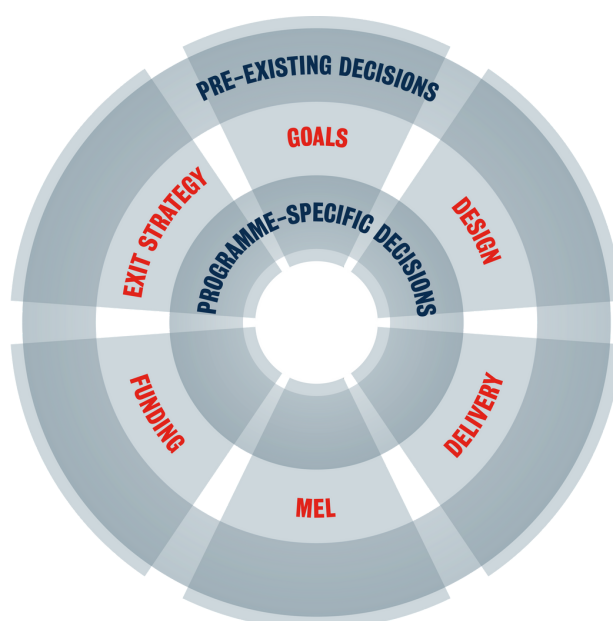


Figure 3. Many different decisions can be mapped using the DMAT

The DMAT also highlights the importance of pre-existing decisions, which provide some of the context within which programme-specific decisions are made.

Pre-existing decisions could, for example, include

legal frameworks, organisation policy documents, or international agreements. Both pre-existing and programme-specific decisions are mapped within the DMAT.

The mapping stage is carried out separately for each of the six decision areas, including both pre-existing and programme-specific decisions in each area.

Mapping involves three steps:

1. First, for each decision made, identify which 'Decision Space' it was made within.
2. Second, undertake a more in-depth exploration of the process of decision-making for each decision, and in particular the extent of engagement of different 'local' actors.
3. Third, explore the process of changing decisions in response to local circumstances (since this process can be different from that of making the initial decision).

Stage B: Reflection: After the mapping stage, practitioners can use the information gathered to reflect on current practice, and to explore how they may wish to move forward. We recommend three key questions for reflection:

1. What patterns are there? How and why do views of different stakeholders differ?
2. Are there gaps between the findings and expectations, commitments or aspirations for localisation?
3. What are some good practices, opportunities and barriers for localising decision-making?

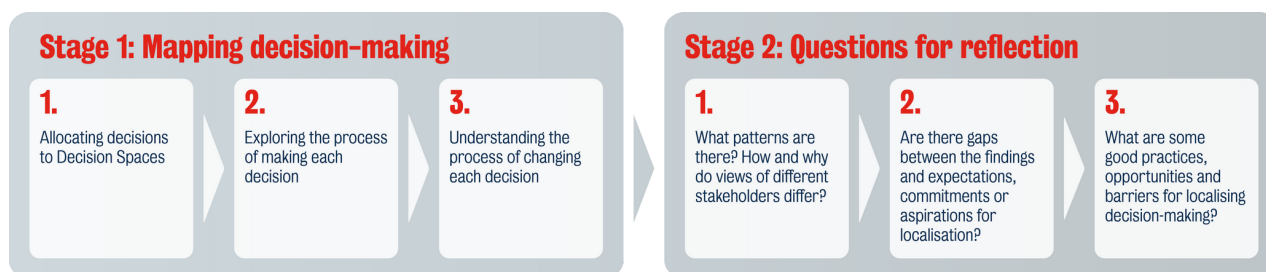


Figure 4. Applying the DMAT involves two stages, mapping and reflection

Piloting the DMAT: Findings from Kenya and India

The DMAT was piloted in four anonymised programming contexts in Kenya and India, to explore how it could be used, and to improve its design iteratively. This included programmes in two large INGOs in Kenya, and in local government and community development interventions in India.

This section presents some key insights from the pilots, illustrating how the DMAT can be used to support a process of mapping and reflection of decision-making power by practitioners working within aid interventions.

In what follows, we do not make any generalisable claims about the nature of decision-making in aid programmes, as this was not the objective of the piloting exercise. (Indeed, these interesting questions are topics for in-depth future research.) The section is organised following the three reflection questions above, in order to illustrate the kind of discussions that the tool can facilitate among practitioners.

Reflection Question 1: What patterns emerge from mapping decisions into decision spaces? Do stakeholders have different views about which decisions occupy which spaces, and why?

The process of mapping programmatic decisions into decision spaces can build awareness among practitioners about how decisions are made and the extent to which local actors are included, excluded, or have influence on programmatic decisions in that intervention. For example, the pilots showed how

goal setting, design and delivery are often mapped to the Partnership Decision Space. Funding is largely mapped to the External Decision Space, as donors typically determine the budgetary ceiling for a programme unilaterally, and often define tight spending heads within it. The DMAT allows for similar discussions to be facilitated across all six decision areas in the programming cycle.

Using the DMAT enables practitioners to reflect upon who is 'local' in the context of the intervention being analysed. This is critical as definitions of who is 'local' or who is 'external' could differ from one context to another. For example, during the pilot, practitioners were uncertain about whether national staff in international organisations were necessarily representative of 'local' perspectives.

The DMAT can build practitioner understanding about the lines of accountability within programmes.

In the pilots, who is accountable to whom largely followed conventional patterns, in which practitioners noted that the direction of accountability was usually upward, from implementing agencies to donors. The pilots did, however, identify a shift towards nurturing other forms of accountability, connected to increasing localisation pressures. For instance, practices of 'forward accountability' (from INGOs to local partners and communities) and 'lateral/peer accountability' (from one INGO to another) were identified.

The tool also helps practitioners to investigate contextual factors that might have impacted decision-making in programmes, by highlighting pre-existing decisions made outside of the programme or project itself, or before it started. These pre-existing decisions can occupy each of the Decision Spaces, for example: national results frameworks (SDG17) in the Local Decision Space; intermediary standard operating procedures in the Partnership Decision Space; or donor strategies in the External Decision Space.

Reflection Question 2: Do the results align with different participants' expectations, commitments or aspirations for the localisation of decision-making?

Applying the DMAT showed how aspirations for localisation are often limited to the Partnership Decision Space. The DMAT helped practitioners to analyse the power dynamics within the Partnership Decision Space, including helping them address the dominant influence external actors often hold within this space.

By surfacing different perspectives, the DMAT **showed how practitioners, even within a single programme, may hold different views on the allocation of decision-making power.** For example, the pilot found that in some cases, donors might map key MEL decisions to the Partnership Decision Space, while intermediaries in the same programme map this under the External Decision Space. The DMAT helped to expose the underlying reasons for such differing perspectives. While monitoring might be undertaken as a joint activity, reporting templates and indicators are often set unilaterally by external actors. In such cases, feedback on these reporting frameworks from local actors is neither sought, nor considered. Similarly, donors might consider recruitment of partners or personnel as falling in the

Partnership Decision Space, as hiring is often undertaken by the implementing partner. Implementers might, however, map this same decision in the External Decision Space as external actors set out the job descriptions, define designations and set acceptable fee rates for staff being hired on programmes, leaving very little discretion, in reality, to hiring managers in the implementing agency. "We have a say on some aspects, but everything needs paperwork and donor approvals," explained a programme implementer.

The DMAT similarly promotes reflection on power dynamics within the Local Decision Space.

For example, a local organisation with more national presence, power and social influence (demonstrable through attributes such as closeness to donor agencies, personal relations with industry gatekeepers or affiliation to big INGOs) is likely to have a greater voice in programmatic decision-making and in setting the broader development agenda, than one that is community-based within a particular geography. In the choice of personnel and partners too, the influence of local actors was characterised by intra-local tensions and power relations, for example those between regional, national and sub-national level actors.

Applying the tool enabled self-reflection among practitioners about their own motivations, vision and role in the localisation of development programming.

It led to reflection on the extent of empowerment of local actors as decision makers, or how the tool could support them to gain more autonomy. "Such a tool has the potential to build negotiation capabilities and agency among local actors through programmes that we implement," said a programme implementer.

Reflection Question 3: What are good practices, opportunities and barriers for enhancing the role of local actors in decision-making, in support of localisation efforts?

Applying the tool can promote reflection on good practices such as the quality of partnerships in the Partnership Decision Space.

For example, practitioners used the tool to interrogate the embeddedness of intermediaries, and how transformational or transactional their relationship with local actors is. Transformational intermediaries were able to prioritise local needs, and even crowdsource funding from across donors to facilitate the pursuit of locally-relevant outcomes that a single donor might be unlikely to support. Within the Partnership Decision Space, practitioners also used the DMAT to reflect on practical negotiation techniques, and empowerment and dissemination approaches to expand the role of local actors in decision making. For instance, instituting inclusive decision-making bodies with local actors within programmes was considered an effective mechanism to involve local actors in decision making in an ongoing, engaged and iterative manner. This can enable local actors to ensure that programmes are based on their needs, allowing them to influence design and delivery.

Applying the tool also enables reflection on knowledge hierarchies and how they could be broken down.

For instance, the tool identified examples of local actors being empowered to be trainers and

facilitators, influencing programmes and communicating decisions to intermediaries and donors, which captured local perspectives and knowledge.

Applying the DMAT can also help to surface existing commitments to localisation and allow for these to be compared to the status of implementation on the ground.

This also supported discussions around the barriers to localisation. For instance, discussions during the pilot showed the limits of local decision-making within the Partnership Decision Space. One limitation was the common assumption that involvement of local actors via the Partnership Decision Space was adequate in advancing localisation. This assumption could undermine efforts to expand the Local Decision Space within programmes. A second limitation was that localisation via the Partnership Decision Space placed capacity and resource demands on local actors, reinforcing asymmetric power relations within partnerships, and highlighting issues of how the time and effort of local actors could be adequately compensated. “For a local actor to participate effectively in the Partnership Decision Space, they must be trained and paid for the time they spend to participate in the space by the INGO. When the INGO does that, it means that the people who have been invited to discuss important things with the INGO will not speak out their mind in front of that INGO because they feel it is rude”, observed one participant who coordinates a partnership between an INGO and local agencies.

Next steps in supporting use of the DMAT

Our team is continuing work to support users of the DMAT, and currently looking at several key questions in the following areas:

Further pilots to examine operationalising and embedding the tool:

- Developing approaches for embedding the DMAT into the programme cycle, not just as a one-off activity. Embedding the DMAT into programming means that someone would be responsible for applying the DMAT throughout the course of a programme, with adequate resources and organisational support to do so. This might look different depending on the type of organisation and its size.
- Considering how findings from the DMAT could inform practice via ongoing feedback, rather than as stand-alone monitoring snapshots.

Development of facilitation guidance that is power-sensitive and inclusive:

- Addressing ethical issues related to the positionality of the facilitator, including practices to ensure inclusivity of the discussions and, given the sensitivity of the issues, to ensure a safe space is created to discuss them (e.g. separate meetings for different types of stakeholder).

- Considering how to ensure that the DMAT is not something that is 'done to' others, but that decisions about how to apply it are inclusive of the people who would be using it.

Exploring the potential of the DMAT to support accountability of localisation commitments:

- Considering different types of indicators and categorisation systems for tracking progress on localisation based on the DMAT, including traffic light approaches.

Applications of a modified tool in different contexts:

- Developing approaches for adapting and applying the tool beyond aid-funded interventions. Further possible applications include: domestically-funded initiatives; decentralisation programmes; or interventions focused on more equitable practices for research, learning and evaluation.

Conclusion

Localisation of decision-making is high on the agenda in the aid sector. The DMAT is a new tool that can be used to analyse decision-making power within aid interventions. It highlights the existence of three decision spaces: Local, Partnership, and External. Findings from piloting the tool in Kenya and India show that it can be used to promote a process of inclusive reflection within programmes on who is involved in decision-making across the programme cycle, and how. This can also facilitate discussions about who is 'local' in a given context, as well as highlight which decisions are made outside the context of the aid intervention, and how. The DMAT also allows practitioners to explore practices and

approaches for enabling local decision-making. This includes reflecting on good practices that can be extended and built on, and barriers to achieving aspirations around localising decision-making power in aid interventions. These reflections could assist practitioners in deciding how to move forward, make changes, and embed these reflections into their ongoing practices. Going forward, there are a number of questions to consider in efforts to operationalise the tool at scale. These include how to embed the tool into everyday practices and reflections, in ways that are inclusive, power-sensitive, timely, and connected to wider processes of change.

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