

Dual Pathways to **Locally-Led** Action

*Findings from the evaluation of Swiss Solidarity's
localisation approach in Ukraine and Syria, 2022-2025*

Charlotte Heward

Independent Humanitarian Evaluation Consultant

LOCALLY-LED PRACTICE · PARTNERSHIP QUALITY · HUMANITARIAN FINANCING

OVERVIEW

Testing two models, at scale, at the same time

Swiss Solidarity is one of the few humanitarian funding platforms to have tested direct funding and intermediary partnerships together, at meaningful scale, over three years. The evidence from that test changes what questions are worth asking. It is no longer whether to fund locally. It is how to build a financing architecture in which different functions serve a common purpose, locally-led humanitarian action, and both work.

Localisation has been pursued for the past decade through single-agency pilots, fragmented commitments, and a binary debate over whether direct funding to national actors should replace, complement, or remain subordinate to intermediated partnerships. Few funding platforms have tested both modalities at meaningful scale simultaneously. Swiss Solidarity is one of them. As a public solidarity platform that has disbursed on average CHF 50 million a year to projects in recent years through 28 accredited Swiss partner organisations, it occupies a distinctive position: philanthropic in character, institutionally accountable, and free from the civil-service administrative pressures that constrain bilateral donors. Its established intermediary model has been in place for decades. In 2022, it began testing a direct funding mechanism alongside it, creating one of the few operational tests of dual-pathway localisation in the sector.

This evaluation assessed two main modalities and a third emerging one. Conducted between November 2025 and April 2026, it examined seven direct funding projects across Ukraine (four projects) and Syria (three projects, where partners are not named for security reasons), partnership quality dynamics between Swiss NGOs and their local counterparts, and a hybrid model in which a Ukrainian organisation was funded directly to sub-grant to smaller local actors. The evaluation drew on 22 stakeholder interviews spanning Swiss Solidarity staff, Swiss NGO partners, board members, and local partners, supplemented by the Nexus partnership quality study, third-party monitoring reports, and a validation workshop with key stakeholders on 10 March 2026.

The central finding is one of **complementarity, not competition**. Direct funding serves mature national organisations with established institutional capacity; intermediary partnerships serve smaller or emerging organisations that benefit from accompaniment, technical support, and the compliance infrastructure Swiss NGOs provide. A third modality, local organisations sub-granting to smaller actors, was also piloted and points toward an under-explored middle ground between full independence and international intermediation.

CHF 50M

Average annual disbursements to projects in recent years

Swiss Solidarity

25%

Grand Bargain direct funding commitment, still unmet

Grand Bargain, 2016

0.07%

Reached local actors in Ukraine directly by March 2024

OCHA Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2024

3 yrs

Of dual-pathway pilot generating a substantial evidence base

Swiss Solidarity, 2022-2025

Four findings from the pilot

FINDING 1

Direct funding partners delivered effectively

Within this pilot, direct funding partners delivered to a quality matching or exceeding intermediated models, with no observable difference in programme benchmarks. Independent third-party monitoring was applied to six of the seven projects and confirmed satisfactory delivery in each; operational conditions (context, access, and organisational maturity) mattered more than the funding channel. The causal mechanism is operational: trust translated into decision-making latitude, allowing partners to adapt to fuel shortages, access disruptions, and security developments without renegotiating terms. One Ukrainian partner characterised the arrangement as among the best funding experiences of their professional career.

Independent research by the Humanitarian Policy Group documented one of Swiss Solidarity's Ukrainian direct funding partners as a success case for direct funding (Barbelet and Njeri, *Pathways towards locally led humanitarian action in Ukraine*, HPG, 2026), providing cross-study triangulation of the pilot's core finding. The model remains selectively tested with mature partners; scaling will require clearer agreements on how risk is shared between funder and partner, and structured entry points that allow less established organisations to build toward direct funding eligibility over time.

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EVALUATION FINDING 1 · UKRAINE

FINDING 2

Sustainability is a significant gap

Within the pilot, short-term grant cycles created fragility across staff retention, community relationships, and institutional continuity. Multiple stakeholders identified this as a primary risk to programme quality, with local partners absorbing the consequences of funding discontinuity through lost capacity and interrupted services. This is a structural feature of the humanitarian sector, not unique to Swiss Solidarity: despite Grand Bargain commitments, most humanitarian organisations, including those working with local actors, receive less than 20% of their funding on a multi-year basis. It is also characteristic of pilot design, which prioritises learning over continuity; the question for the next phase is how to build transition mechanisms into a permanent instrument.

The validation workshop, held in March 2026, confirmed sustainability as a significant issue, distinguishing between projects that sustain existing capacity and those that create it from scratch. Swiss Solidarity's own practice already shows what design-led continuity looks like: in Syria, CHF 1.6M bridged a gap between UN pooled fund cycles for education programming. Formalising such bridging as

a design feature, rather than ad hoc response, would address most of the gap. Short-term grants do not test whether locally-led practice works effectively over time; they test whether it can survive being defunded.

FINDING 3

Accountability mechanisms need calibration, not expansion

The pilot's monitoring architecture, including third-party monitoring not applied to Swiss NGO projects, was designed to give the Swiss Solidarity Secretariat assurance of programme quality and satisfactory delivery. One finding was that partners experienced this as manageable but asymmetric. Evidence suggests calibrating monitoring intensity to grant size and risk profile rather than partner type, evolving toward trust-based verification that prioritises learning over compliance.

Swiss Solidarity selected organisations already funded by pooled funds or major donors, relying on existing pooled-fund due diligence rather than creating new compliance requirements, which minimised burden on partners. This reflects Swiss Solidarity's intentional design of matching direct funding to mature partners, with the intermediary pathway serving smaller or emerging organisations. The sector is increasingly exploring "due diligence passporting", where donors coordinate harmonised processes, though reviews show even simplified models still create burden.

FINDING 4

Overhead provisions are a comparative strength

Swiss Solidarity's 10% indirect cost recovery rate, applied equally to direct funding partners and Swiss NGO intermediaries, compares favourably with sector norms, where local actors typically receive between 4% and 12% while international NGOs and UN agencies retain the bulk. Local actors are usually first to feel funding cuts, with little overhead to sustain operations. Indirect cost recovery still does not systematically reach local organisations, a persistent barrier to staff retention, longer-term planning, and institutional sustainability identified across the sector (Viswanathan et al., 2026). The evidence suggests two adjustments: clarifying that overhead can be used flexibly (for staffing, training, security, or institutional needs), and reviewing whether 10% is sufficient for partners operating without headquarters infrastructure. NEAR advocates for overhead rates of up to 15% as a sector standard, an aspirational reference point.

Transparency about overhead policies is itself a dimension of equity. Local and national actors frequently do not know that funders have overhead policies at all, deepening the power imbalance between them (Hassanien and Pearson, 2026). With the humanitarian sector under acute funding pressure, the overhead conversation is not a technical footnote: it determines whether locally-led organisations can retain staff, maintain systems, and continue to function between grants. Swiss Solidarity's practice of communicating overhead flexibility directly to partners is as significant as the rate itself.

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EVALUATION FINDING · 2026

PARTNERSHIP DYNAMICS

Partnership quality varies more by context than pathway

Partnership maturity varies by context. The Nexus partnership quality study found Syrian partnerships have evolved further toward strategic collaboration than Ukrainian ones, reflecting longer engagement histories, geographic proximity between some Swiss NGOs and their Syrian partners, and the nature of the crisis itself. Language barriers are a structural feature of these partnerships: most communication between Swiss NGOs and local counterparts occurs through translation or in a second language, with implications for the depth of strategic dialogue, the accuracy of needs assessments, and the power dynamics of decision-making. This dimension is rarely surfaced in partnership quality frameworks but emerged consistently across interviews.

Equity across partnership dimensions is uneven. Decision-making is the most equitable dimension across partnerships. Resource sharing lags behind: local partners rarely have visibility into the full project budget, overhead policies, or how resources are allocated across the partnership chain. Capacity strengthening remains predominantly one-directional and focused on administrative compliance rather than the priorities local partners identify themselves. This echoes broader sector patterns: over 63% of local actors in the most recent ALNAP survey rated international support for their leadership and capacity as poor or fair.

Accompaniment costs are significant and largely invisible. Swiss NGO intermediaries provide substantial accompaniment (mentoring, compliance support, technical assistance) estimated at 6-16% of project value. These costs are not yet systematically budgeted, despite being permissible within Swiss Solidarity's framework. Formalising them as standard budget items would position the intermediary role as an investment in locally-led practice rather than a hidden overhead.

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NEXUS PARTNERSHIP QUALITY STUDY · 2026

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Pathways for scaling

The evaluation considered how Swiss Solidarity can best structure its financing architecture to match different instruments to different actors and contexts. Two strategic pathways were identified and assessed against governance readiness, risk tolerance, sustainability ambition, cost-effectiveness, and operational capacity. A third channel, local organisations sub-granting to smaller actors, was piloted during the evaluation and is presented here as an additional direction to explore rather than a fully tested strategic pathway. The recommended approach combines scaled direct funding with reformed intermediary partnerships.

PATHWAY 1

Consolidate

Keep direct funding at its current limited scale and treat it as an ongoing pilot rather than a permanent instrument. Minimises governance change, but leaves unresolved the sustainability gaps the evidence identifies, and risks confirmed findings being set aside rather than acted on.

Evaluation evidence does not support this option.

PATHWAY 2 · RECOMMENDED

Scale & Reform

Make direct funding a permanent part of Swiss Solidarity's general funding mechanism, with a minimum allocation that scales with appeal size (CHF 3M threshold). At the same time, strengthen the intermediary channel: make accompaniment costs visible in budgets, introduce systematic partnership quality measurement, and communicate overhead policies clearly to all partners. Both channels are maintained; both are improved.

AN ADDITIONAL CHANNEL · TO EXPLORE

Local intermediary model: a Ukrainian organisation was funded directly to sub-grant to smaller local actors, with a local actor performing the intermediary function. Further design and evaluation are warranted, with useful comparative learning available from Country-Based Pooled Funds and other pooled mechanisms pursuing localisation through shared risk structures (Hughes et al., 2025).

Priority recommendations

Evidence supports embedding sustainability mechanisms in project design. Transition planning from the outset, continuation reviews six months before grant end, bridge funding provisions to prevent staff and capacity loss, and co-funding coordination with other donors to stagger end dates.

The analysis points toward calibrating monitoring to grant size, not partner type. Move from an architecture that distinguishes between Swiss and local partners toward one that differentiates by risk profile and grant volume. This reduces burden on smaller partners and increases equity across the portfolio while maintaining risk control. Evolve toward trust-based verification models that frame monitoring as beneficial to programme quality rather than a compliance exercise.

Articulating complementarity in public communications. Public-facing instruments should communicate both pathways as necessary and mutually reinforcing. Good practice examples from direct funding should be shared in public reporting, framed as "dual approach, both pathways necessary, working together" rather than suggesting one model is superior.

Evidence supports favouring multi-year commitments of at least 24 months. Aligned with the Grand Bargain recommendation of at least 30% multi-year funding, a target most humanitarian organisations have not yet met. Protracted crises are still largely served with short-term grants.

Formalising accompaniment costs in project budgets. Swiss NGO intermediaries absorb accompaniment costs estimated at 6-16% of project value. Systematic inclusion in budgets, with clear articulation of what the accompaniment involves, positions this as an investment in locally-led practice rather than a hidden overhead.

SECTOR CONTEXT

Where Swiss Solidarity sits

Across the humanitarian sector, localisation has been pursued for the past decade through small-scale, single-agency pilots that lack the scale and incentives to shift the system's risk-sharing, funding flows, or accountability structures. Direct funding remains the primary localisation metric and continues to fall short sector-wide: despite a 25% Grand Bargain commitment, only 4.5% of trackable funding reached local actors directly in 2023, declining further to 3.6% in 2024; in Ukraine, just 0.07% by March 2024. Against this backdrop, Swiss Solidarity's pilot is significant precisely because it moves beyond the single-agency model: few funding platforms of comparable scale have operationalised localisation across two modalities simultaneously. The pilot has generated a consistent and substantial evidence base, and Swiss Solidarity now enters the next phase with a demonstrably functioning direct funding model and an institutional track record sufficient to support integrating direct funding into its general funding mechanism. **The question is no longer whether to fund locally, but how to structure funding ecosystems that match different actors to the modalities that enable them to perform.**

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This public brief summarises findings from the independent evaluation of Swiss Solidarity's locally-led humanitarian practice pilot, conducted between November 2025 and April 2026. The evaluation assessed direct funding in Ukraine and Syria, and partnership quality between Swiss NGO partners and local counterparts.

The complete report is available from Swiss Solidarity on request.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Heward led this evaluation as an independent consultant. Her recent work in humanitarian evaluation includes four years as Learning Adviser to the Disasters Emergency Committee's Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal and earlier contributions to the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System (2018) during her seven years with Groupe URD. She works across locally-led practice, partnership quality, and humanitarian financing.