Rethinking Community Driven Recovery

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Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to affected populations
ABA	Area based approach
ABRA	Area based risk assessment
AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
APCC	Advancing Peace in Complex Crises
BBB	Build Back Better
CBO	Community-based organization
CCCM	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CDR/D	Community-driven recovery and development
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DNH	Do No Harm
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
DSD	Divisional Secretary's Division
FCPA	Fragile Context Programme Approach
FI	OCHA Flagship Initiative
GND	*Grama Niladharis Divisions*
HDP	Humanitarian-development-peace
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO	International non-governmental organization
KII	Key informant interview
FI	UN OCHA's Flagship Initiative
FGD	Focus group discussion
LRA	Livelihood Risk Assessment
LRRD	Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MIAD	Multi-Area Input Development
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NWoW	New Way of Working
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD DAC	OECD's Development Assistance Committee
RRR	Rights Resilience Response
SFCG	Search for Common Ground
SIPA	Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs
STRIDE	Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence
UNCT	UN Country Team
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UN HC	UN Humanitarian Coordinator
UN RC	UN Resident Coordinator
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USAID BHA	USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

Executive Summary

Acted's AGORA framework came into being in 2016 with the motto, "Think local, act global." It is Acted's response to the need for new solutions to longstanding problems with international aid. AGORA is a data-driven, area based approach that seeks to implement the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus and localization agenda. In partnership with IMPACT, Acted has implemented AGORA in 17 countries and recently made investing in "AGORA 2.0" one of its corporate priorities. As such, now is a pivotal time to take stock of AGORA's strengths, lessons learned, and opportunities for improvement.

To this end, a research team from Columbia University's SIPA conducted an assessment of AGORA in order to contribute to the methodology's proof of concept and to make actionable recommendations for Acted and IMPACT to further enhance AGORA's implementation.

First, the team sought to determine the extent to which the AGORA methodology is in line with what the literature on aid reform recommends and how other aid actors have chosen to provide assistance. Generally, the desk review validated that AGORA is aligned with best practices on the HDP nexus, though there is room to strengthen the integration of peacebuilding efforts. Further, the project found that AGORA presents an excellent example of community-driven approaches, with its participatory methods and commitment to centering affected people in the identification of needs and priorities and in the implementation of local solutions. This community-driven approach is further facilitated by the area based component of AGORA, which Acted could strengthen by better leveraging the coordination opportunities that area based approaches (ABAs) foster. Finally, the desk review highlighted the importance of addressing the limitations of traditional humanitarian funding in nexus approaches, which is applicable to fully operationalize the AGORA methodology and meet its ambitious goals in project countries.

Second, the team conducted a case study of the AGORA project in Sri Lanka to assess how effectively the methodology is being implemented. This fieldwork confirmed that the local interface is one of the central elements of AGORA and presents a solid concept to facilitate a community-driven approach, build social cohesion, and secure local and national ownership for long-term sustainability. Further, the fieldwork highlights AGORA's evidence-based approach as a strength for identifying an effective territorial entry point and engaging government actors. Looking ahead, building in adaptability into the project and solidifying a sustainability strategy, including to link local and external actors, will be critical to ensure the ongoing relevance and effectiveness of the project.

Third, the team developed recommendations for AGORA, both globally and for Sri Lanka specifically, based on the findings from the desk review and fieldwork. These recommendations revolved around: strengthening global AGORA guidance, crafting a formal peace engagement strategy, institutionalizing adaptability and risk mitigation, expanding coordination and local knowledge production, building on partnerships, diversifying funding streams, securing sustainability for the local interface and broader projects, and refining internal Acted and IMPACT practices for more effective collaboration and program management.

AGORA offers real promise for Acted and IMPACT to better support vulnerable people in fragile and crisis contexts. Moving forward, the task will be to act on lessons learned from existing AGORA projects, leverage other actors' knowledge and actions, and continue to push past the boundaries of traditional ways of working.

1. Introduction

The past 30 years have witnessed a growing recognition that humanitarian aid and development assistance are not as effective as they could be in addressing fragility and in reducing the growing level of needs around the world. Since the 1990s, international actors also increasingly acknowledge that peacebuilding efforts are failing to prevent the rise and recurrence of armed conflict, which are increasingly becoming more protracted.

In light of this reckoning, international assistance has seen a proliferation of initiatives that seek to depart from the traditional model of aid. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was a decisive moment in this reform process, formalizing the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus and establishing localization as a system-wide priority under the Grand Bargain. HDP nexus approaches - the latest iteration of "linking thinking" that aid actors have pursued over decades to better align humanitarian and development strategies - have risen in popularity for their potential to foster coordinated, collective, and holistic responses to complex emergencies.[1] The push for localization, accompanied by calls to decolonize aid and promote accountability, recognizes that affected peoples are best placed to identify what they need and has produced some shifts in programming and financing, to enable recovery and development projects that seek to shift the decision-making power to affected communities. Area based approaches have emerged as one strategy for fostering such locally led responses, particularly following the earthquake in Haiti[2] and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s call for a paradigm shift towards community-based approaches in 2010.[3] Despite some progress since the WHS, significant work remains to be done to fully operationalize and benefit from HDP nexus, area based, and community-driven approaches to aid.

Within this context of reform, Acted and IMPACT developed the AGORA methodology in an effort to address some of the shortcomings of the aid system and deliver more effective and accountable aid. An innovative approach, AGORA nevertheless builds on long standing principles, concepts, and collective experiences of the aid sector. As such, this report seeks to consolidate learning on HDP nexus, area based, and localized initiatives in order to review the AGORA framework against the findings and experiences of other aid actors. The purpose of this review is to make actionable recommendations for Acted and IMPACT to further strengthen the AGORA methodology. More broadly, this report also aims to contribute to the wider body of knowledge on innovative, reform-minded approaches to aid and support the aid community at-large in adapting their efforts for greater effectiveness and impact. Given the ongoing ambiguity of terms like localization and the nexus, even as more and more aid actors adopt them, it is ever more important to learn from past and ongoing efforts to avoid repeating mistakes and help build collective, system-wide knowledge to inform stronger methodologies and projects.

The following report is the final product of a "capstone" research project, undertaken from November 2023 - May 2024 through a partnership between Acted and six graduate students and one faculty advisor of Columbia University's SIPA. This project had three components:

- A literature review of trends, themes, and challenges within the aid industry related to the HDP nexus, localization, and area based approaches, complemented with key informant interviews with senior officials representing international and national NGOs, UN agencies

and affiliated coordinating bodies, international financial institutions and bilateral donors. A complete list of all organizations interviewed is available in [Annex A](#).

- A comparative assessment of the AGORA methodology relative to other comparable frameworks and guidelines developed by other international NGOs, with a focus on identifying areas of innovation within AGORA and possible gaps and/or areas for improvement. This assessment component drew heavily from internal AGORA 2.0 guidance memos and focus group discussions (FGDs) with Acted and IMPACT headquarters staff.
- An in-depth case study on the application of AGORA in the project "Promoting disaster risk reduction (DRR) for livelihood resilience via community-led, area based approaches in Sri Lanka."

This report will begin with an overview of this research project's methodological approach. The report will then share a summary of findings from a comprehensive literature review and 20 key informant interviews with (I)NGOs, UN entities, and donors involved in aid reform efforts. The full findings from the literature review and interviews are included in a separate document shared with Acted. Next, the report will provide an analysis of the significance of these desk review findings, including in terms of how AGORA is distinct from or aligns with the literature and best practices. A summary table to compare the key methodological elements of other approaches similar to AGORA will follow this analysis. The report will then shift to analyzing the findings from the research team's fieldwork in Sri Lanka and assessing how effectively the project is implementing the AGORA methodology so far. The report will end with a brief conclusion to reiterate key takeaways and a series of recommendations for AGORA, both globally and for Sri Lanka specifically.

2. Methodological Overview

2.1. Methodological approach

Given the nuanced and multifaceted areas of focus and the limited availability of quantitative data on the research topics, the research team opted for a broadly qualitative approach, drawing upon a diverse range of primary and secondary sources. The research process had three key components to systematically address the objectives of the study, as outlined in the Introduction.

The research team was committed to adhering to ethical practices throughout the project, with a special emphasis on the data collection phase. Key measures included data protection and privacy measures (see Annex B); comprehensive training on research methods, data collection and management guidelines, and cultural sensitivities; and rigorous tool design to ensure that the data collection process respected the rights and dignity of all participants and stakeholders; and a strong consultative process with Acted and IMPACT staff to ensure alignment with a "Do No Harm" approach. The research team also sought to be cognizant of the power dynamics that existed across gender, race, ethnic, and class lines, between both the research team and stakeholders as well as among those stakeholders, especially during the field research.

2.2 Fieldwork in Sri Lanka

The capstone team visited Sri Lanka from March 11 to March 16, 2024, and conducted a total of 22 key informant interviews and 19 FGDs across all project districts: Vavuniya and Kilinochchi in the Northern province, and Batticaloa and Ampara in the Eastern province (see Tables 1 and 2 below). Coverage of all project districts enabled a comprehensive review of the project, geographic disaggregation, and comparison of the implementation and impact of AGORA between and across provinces and districts. Data collection in Sri Lanka featured interviews and discussions with country-level Acted and IMPACT staff, local partners, national and local authorities, other international and local NGOs, local interfaces, and community members.

The specific interviewees and *Grama Niladhari* Divisions (GNDs) selected for field visits were chosen by the regional Acted offices, taking into account accessibility and availability of community members as well as ethnic diversity and types of disaster risks they faced. Given that the local interfaces include a range of different stakeholders including CSOs, GND officers, and community members, the FGDs were used as an opportunity to consult participants on the various aspects of engagement. Whilst FGDs with interfaces were mixed gender due to the gender inclusivity of interfaces, gender-disaggregated FGDs were also conducted to investigate gender-specific issues and explore to what extent female interface participants felt their voices were heard in a secure environment.

Table 1: Key information interviews in Sri Lanka

Data collection tool	Strategic stakeholder	# interviewees	Locations
Key informant interviews (KIIs)	IMPACT Country Office	2	Colombo
	Acted Sri Lanka Country Office - Country Coordinator, Project Development Manager, MEAL Manager	3	Colombo
	Acted Project Management Staff - Project Manager, Project Officers, MEAL Officer	6	Vavuniya, Batticaloa
	Project partner - CEFE NET Sri Lanka	2	Colombo
	Donor - USAID BHA	1	(Conducted remotely)
	USAID BHA grantees - Save the Children, World Vision, World Food Program	3	Colombo
	National NGOs - Sarvodaya, Palm Foundation	2	Colombo, Vavuniya
	National government - Disaster Management Center (DMC)	1	Colombo
	Local government - Divisional Secretary's Division Disaster Management Officials	3	Vavuniya, Batticaloa
Total		22	

Table 2: Focus group discussions in Sri Lanka

Data collection tool	Strategic stakeholder	# interviews held	Locations
Focus group discussions (FGDs)	Local interfaces	11	Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Ampara
	Adult women (+18)	4 (1 per district)	Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Ampara
	Adult men (+18)	4 (1 per district)	Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Ampara
Total		19	

2.3 Limitations

- The capstone team gained insights into the implementation of AGORA in various geographical contexts, including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan, and Libya, through FGDs with Acted and IMPACT staff at the country level, as well as through reviewing Acted documentation. However, the limited number of reviews available on AGORA country implementation capturing findings and best practices (except for Afghanistan) limited our ability to compare AGORA implementation across different case studies.
- The decision to select only Sri Lanka for an in-depth case study means that findings and recommendations derived from the fieldwork might not be universally applicable to AGORA projects, particularly where governance and conflict contexts differ significantly.

- As the project in Sri Lanka is still in the first year of implementation, the implementation of locally identified solutions and community-led monitoring had not yet been carried out at the time of our visit. As such, the research team was not able to assess these components of the AGORA methodology or the final outcome of the project.
- To guide the research team to interview and FGD locations, Acted project staff accompanied the research team throughout the fieldwork and were present during interviews and FGDs, in some cases participating themselves to clarify translations and contribute to the discussion. In most cases, the Acted staff knew the participants personally and had seemingly good personal relationships. However, it is possible that their presence may have influenced some of the responses of participants and their willingness to speak transparently about the project.

3. Trends and issues across HDP nexus, localization & area based approaches: Findings from the literature and KIIs

This chapter provides a high-level summary of the current discourse around the HDP nexus, localization, and area based approaches, and the financing systems necessary to fund these new frameworks. An in-depth analysis of the literature review, including additional quotes, case studies, and an overview of historical trends in the aid reform effort, is available in a separate document shared with Acted.

3.1 The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus

Significant advancements have been made in promoting the HDP nexus as stakeholders increasingly seek to address the protracted crises caused by conflict, climate change, and widespread poverty. However, questions persist regarding how the nexus is understood among these actors, its practical implementation, and the roles of various stakeholders within the framework.

3.1.1 Diversity of definitions

The conceptual landscape of the HDP nexus is varied, with definitions and interpretations heavily influenced by specific mandates and operational perspectives. Humanitarian actors generally view the nexus as a means to enhance coordination with development counterparts and reduce humanitarian needs over time.[4] In contrast, development actors tend to focus on the capacity of development efforts to help mitigate conflicts and emphasize the importance of bolstering resilience in their programs.[5] Peacebuilders, meanwhile, promote the nexus as a tool to tackle the underlying causes of conflict and violence.[6]

These divergences reflect differences in interpretations of scope of the nexus. FAO, NRC and UNDP found a distinction between "narrow" approaches that emphasize institutional coordination and linear transitions from humanitarian to development and "wider" approaches, in line with OECD DAC recommendations, which aim to foster closer integration across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding domains.[7]

Yet even within sectors, the application and understanding of the nexus vary. For example, a lack of consensus among humanitarians is driven by differences in institutional cultures and areas of expertise, with some actors like Médecins Sans Frontières openly criticizing the nexus over potential politicization and the weakening of core humanitarian values.[8,9] Organizations with dual mandates, however, demonstrate a greater willingness to link humanitarian and development

work, with resilience, livelihood, and gender programming providing a key entry point.[10;11] National and local NGOs and organizations in the Global South also contend that their programming has long adopted a nexus approach (even if not called that way) by not always differentiating between humanitarian and development work, which aligns with how affected communities mostly view these issues.

3.1.2 Integrating peacebuilding

The nexus has prompted development and humanitarian actors to reflect on how their work impacts conflict and to pursue more conflict-sensitive programming that adheres to the "Do No Harm" (DNH) principle.[12] For example, the CDA Collaborative has developed a strong DNH tool and argues that DNH improves the effectiveness, accountability, and efficiency of aid.[13] However, beyond DNH, there remains a degree of consensus that the peacebuilding pillar is the least developed part of the nexus, both conceptually and operationally.[14] This is partly due to humanitarian actors' concerns about compromising humanitarian principles if they are seen to be engaging in political processes. However, practical challenges also persist, such as the absence of formal standards for peacebuilding and the lack of established coordination bodies dedicated to peacebuilding efforts.

"I think that we all feel that the hard-edged substantive work of peacebuilding is still the squeaky third wheel in the nexus" - INGO C

Where humanitarians and development actors actively work on peacebuilding activities, they tend to pursue "little p" opportunities - such as enabling food systems and equitable resource allocation and promoting social cohesion - and are hesitant to engage in "big P" initiatives related to supporting peace negotiations. IASC guidance highlights the potential for a "little p" approach that seeks to address conflict drivers in the short-term to open up opportunities for nexus programming.[15] As such, the political work of "big P" is often left to multilateral or state actors with little coordination with more grassroots initiatives. Further, NGOs operating in authoritarian and politically unstable environments have underscored the challenges of discussing "peacebuilding" directly, as the term's usage is highly sensitive. Instead, they have adapted language, utilizing terms such as "resilience" or "community inclusion."[16]

3.1.3 Coordination and working with governments

Aid actors across the pillars have begun concerted efforts to actively apply the nexus approach into their practice.[17] As a report by NYU Center on International Cooperation noted, "more, and more effective, collaboration is emerging among humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding (HDP) actors" with key progress being made in the areas of joint analysis, planning, and operational links.[18] As of 2021, collective outcomes had been successfully established in four countries and were in progress in six countries, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa.[19] Key successes from these contexts include the integration of local and national authorities and the inclusion of NGOs and civil society in nexus taskforces, securing buy-in and ensuring local ownership.[20]

However, fundamental challenges in implementing the nexus arise from the difficulty in achieving cohesion between humanitarian and development actors, who differ in mandates, operational

methods, priorities, and project timelines. Deeply entrenched silos between the fields pose challenges in establishing effective coordination modalities, especially for development actors. While humanitarian actors are more accustomed to coordination through their involvement in the cluster system and engagement with OCHA, development actors face significant hurdles due to the lack of equivalent coordination frameworks, the prevalence of bilateral funding, and competitive dynamics among development organizations.[21]

"Where contextually applicable, clusters/sectors need to establish and enhance interactions with government and/or local authority partners, and development partner coordination platforms such as results groups, to guide joint analysis, planning and monitoring."[22]

There are specific challenges in implementing the nexus approach at the country level. Organizations often report that country-level staff are not adequately involved in the development of nexus strategies at headquarters, nor are they sufficiently guided or supported in understanding or applying these approaches in their projects. Without a deep understanding at the country level and clear guidance on implementation, there is a risk that nexus-enabling activities such as coordination meetings and community engagement are reduced to mere bureaucratic "checkboxes" rather than being fully integrated components of programming. This issue is particularly acute in crisis contexts, where the urgency of action may lead actors to prioritize expediency over procedural thoroughness. Consequently, many organizations emphasize that coordination efforts are most effective when led at the country level and accompanied by substantial capacity building for staff to ensure thorough engagement and commitment.

Lessons learned from adopting the New Way of Working (NWoW) have underscored the crucial role of competent and committed UN RC/HC leadership in leading coordination efforts.[23] However, whilst the guidance often highlights the importance of government buy-in and ownership,[24] there remains ambiguity about who should have responsibility for leading and coordinating the implementation of the nexus at the country level. Certainly, there are robust arguments for strengthening the state as a core component of the nexus - including long-term sustainability, strengthening state-society relations, and securing stability. Yet, it is in precisely the contexts where nexus approaches are most necessary - conflict-affected and fragile contexts with protracted conflict - that state engagement may be most challenging and even problematic. Current policy guidance lacks definitive guidance on appropriate application and adaptation of the nexus in such cases. This includes situations where the government or key political stakeholders are not recognized or are sanctioned by the international community (e.g. Afghanistan), where humanitarian needs are exceptionally high (e.g. Gaza), or where governance has entirely collapsed (e.g. Haiti).[25] As such, the modalities for engagement with the state differs across contexts.

3.1.4 Adaptability and flexibility

Given the volatile nature of fragile contexts where nexus approaches are being applied, the adaptability of programs is a critical success factor. However, there is ongoing debate about the best timing and methods for adjusting the focus and type of aid to ensure it remains appropriate, relevant, and timely.[26] Implementing adaptability mechanisms—such as contingency plans for pre-identified contextual and operational risks, robust and clear decision-making processes, and strong, reliable relationships for better coordination—are crucial for enabling actors to swiftly

adjust their work and resources in response to emerging crises. However, these actions often require major institutional reforms and procedures, the rethinking of core programming tools, and most importantly, flexible financing.[27]

> **Case study: Adaptive programming in Ukraine**
> Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NGO Global Communities had been implementing a local governance strengthening project in Ukraine, featuring capacity building on citizen engagement, budgeting, and service delivery, as well as establishing stronger connections with civil society. Following the outbreak of the war, Global Communities was able to effectively utilize its pre-established network and relationships with local governance actors and civil society groups to initiate and mobilize its humanitarian response.

Flexibility in nexus programming, understood as developing custom solutions and programming with local actors instead of imposing predetermined projects, is also recognized as crucial to enabling successful nexus approaches. Flexibility also underscores the significance of localization, which is deeply interlinked with and central to the success of the nexus.[28] Local actors are crucial in bridging the gaps among humanitarian, development, and peace organizations due to their overlapping partnership choices in specific contexts.[29] Furthermore, they possess in-depth knowledge of local conditions and project feasibility, making them essential advisors on priorities that span the different pillars of aid. Lastly, as they are often first responders in crises, local actors are also often best positioned to adjust and implement contingency plans where situations evolve.

Finally, flexibility and adaptability become even more salient when considering the challenge of determining timelines for nexus projects. Whilst humanitarian initiatives typically operate on short timelines of up to two years, development projects can often extend over five years or more.[30] Allowing for extended project timelines while incorporating adaptive measures to pivot to humanitarian work as needed offers a viable strategy to bridge the discrepancies in timelines within a unified nexus framework. Further, having baseline data and indicators that can provide the necessary evidence to guide a pivot in programming priorities where needed can help ensure projects maintain impact, even amid contextual changes during relatively short timelines.[31]

3.1.5 Climate and gender mainstreaming

Climate change and gender are increasingly viewed as key cross-cutting conceptual features of the nexus as well as practical entry points for implementation due to their cross-cutting characteristics.

The vulnerabilities associated with climate change not only overlap with but also intensify existing challenges related to humanitarian needs, underdevelopment, and armed conflict.[32] Notably, 14 of the 25 countries most vulnerable to climate change are concurrently grappling with active conflict.[33] In response, humanitarian organizations and donors are increasingly advocating for proactive measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change, including the adoption of anticipatory action. In this context, nexus approaches are proving to be an effective framework for better responding to natural disasters and crises whilst facilitating the integration of climate change

mitigation and adaptation into long-term development strategies and ensuring that ongoing conflicts do not derail progress.[34]

However, stakeholders differ on how best to integrate climate considerations. Although there is growing acknowledgement of climate change as a "threat or risk multiplier" in conflict contexts, the links between the peace and security agenda and the climate change agenda remain weak.[35] Moreover, humanitarians remain concerned about how to maintain impartiality - providing aid based on need alone - in the face of universally high needs created by the future of climate change.[36] There are also concerns about the potential securitization of climate change, which could circumscribe specific policy actions.[37]

In addition to climate change, gender mainstreaming is gaining prominence in discussions about the nexus. These discussions emphasize the unique needs of women and girls that overlap across the nexus's pillars, such as addressing gender-based violence in displacement settings, the compounded vulnerabilities faced by women-led households, and the connections between women's empowerment and economic growth.[38] The OECD DAC has even proclaimed that "gender equality is essential to nexus approaches," because gender inequalities limit the impacts of humanitarian aid, development assistance, and peace processes.[39] Further, the DAC Recommendations integrate gender considerations with explicit reference to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, "including through ensuring a focus on gender equality and women's leadership across humanitarian, development and peace actions as essential elements in achieving sustainable progress."[40] Thus, gender mainstreaming in the context of the nexus goes beyond ensuring a commitment to gender-based inclusion, but also opening opportunities for the advancement of the nexus. Focusing on cross-cutting themes related to gender (such as protection) can ease the shift from humanitarian to development response, or vice versa.[41] In the Congo, for example, the UN has identified addressing gender-based violence as a collective outcome within their nexus approach.[42]

> **Case study: Oxfam's social cohesion programming with women's savings groups in Mali**
> Initially focusing on livelihoods and resilience, Oxfam cultivated a robust partnership with women's savings groups in South-Central Mali. Recognizing the considerable social capital these women possessed within their communities, as well as their potential as local leaders and influencers, Oxfam later refined their programming to emphasize leadership and social cohesion. This strategic shift enabled these groups to engage more effectively in active citizenship and local peace initiatives, leveraging their community roles to foster greater societal impact.[43]

3.2 Localization

The HDP nexus overlaps closely with the localization agenda, as humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding approaches increasingly emphasize prioritizing local ownership and capacities.[44] Localization recognizes that effective, sustainable solutions to complex crises necessitate strategies that prioritize working with local partners and entities, building and leveraging local knowledge and capacities, and promoting local ownership and sustainability. As such, the localization agenda aims to foster more appropriate, accountable, and transformative responses,

acknowledging that local actors possess uniquely valuable insights and capabilities in navigating their own communities' particular challenges.[45]

3.2.1 Equitable partnership

Although mainstream approaches to localization have largely focused on unlocking greater financing for local organizations (see Financing section for further discussion), organizations have in recent years begun to think about localization beyond financing and reconsidered the nature of their partnership models.[46] These discussions have been driven in part by broader discussions about racism and colonialism in the aid sector, but also due to growing bodies of evidence that show that local ownership fundamentally improves the quality and sustainability of projects.[47] Establishing truly equitable partnerships includes engaging partners, not just subcontracting work to local actors, but rather working together to co-design proposals and project designs, giving partners decision-making power, giving partners a "seat at the table" - particularly in conversations with donors and high-level actors - and adapting to and accommodating their specific needs and modalities (e.g. reporting requirements, language, connectivity issues etc.).[48]

> **Case study: Children's Radio in Liberia**
> At 16, Kimmie Weeks, a children's rights activist from Liberia, conceived and established the country's first children's radio show, named "The Children's Bureau of Information."[49] The initiative, developed in collaboration with Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in 1997, featured 15-minute weekly broadcasts with the goal of reintegrating child soldiers into local communities. The program was highly successful, leading to its replication across over 16 countries. It remains one of the most successful initiatives run by SFCG, who has since developed a comprehensive methodology for youth radio in peacebuilding.[50]

3.2.2 Diversifying local partners

A number of organizations also highlighted that the type of partners matters for localization.[51] For example, a review of USAID's localization efforts noted that the agency had included organizations such as the Tanzania office of Deloitte as a "local actor" in their calculations of localized funding.[52] International organizations have a tendency to partner with the largest and most established local actors due to pressures and preferences to work with institutionally similar organizations with proven levels of capacity and ability to implement programmes with minimal risk, whilst ignoring smaller or marginalized local organizations. In many cases, larger local organizations may not have strong linkages with local communities, but rather are more aligned with donor and domestic elite priorities.[53] In response, some organizations have begun to place more emphasis not only on capacity but also inclusivity and representativeness when looking for partners, and adopting stakeholder mapping tools to identify non-traditional civil society partners, such as women's and youth-led groups.[54]

"We emphasize working with strategic partners who really create enduring change… we put a lot of emphasis on working with partners who are outside of the… typical NGO space." - INGO C

3.2.3 Community-led programming

Beyond simply working with local organizations, localization integrates ways of working directly with communities themselves, given that they often are intended to be the 'beneficiaries' of programming.[55] Moving beyond the 'accountability to affected populations' (AAP) principle that emphasized the need of organizations to be transparent and responsible to those they intend to assist, community-led programming promotes a driving role as opposed to a responsive role for local communities.[56]

Community-led programming or accountability to affected populations encompasses engaging and convening community members and/or representatives to identify key issues and priorities and empowering them to take the lead on implementing and monitoring the solutions identified. OCHA's Flagship Initiative (FI) reflects a commitment to this kind of programming, utilizing local knowledge for program design, and fostering strategic partnerships for inclusive responses to conflict dynamics. In Niger and the Philippines, the FI is undertaking meaningful localization through systematic and participatory community engagement, decentralized coordination, and direct funding to local entities.[57]

Although the advantages of community-led programming are clear, it is acknowledged that these approaches are often time-consuming to implement and difficult to scale, and thus require long-term donor commitment and specialized expertise to ensure the approaches are implemented appropriately. There are also associated risks of community-led projects being captured by elites, thereby becoming a space for political competition and corruption.[58] In addition, while this participatory approach boosts the relevance and impact of humanitarian aid, it is essential to manage community involvement carefully to prevent fatigue and constrain expectations that may ultimately erode local communities' trust in the long-run.[59]

"It's burdensome and unfair to communities, to constantly be asking them what they want and need and how you can best help them, if you can't actually help them." - INGO D

3.2.4 Advocacy and promoting local knowledge

Lastly, many actors highlight that localization should not stop at implementing projects, but also strengthen advocacy and promote local knowledge at national and international levels. Aligned with the efforts to decolonize aid, actors such as Oxfam are increasingly exploring ways to elevate the voices of local partners and actors as opposed to speaking on their behalf, particularly in high-level forums, and providing platforms for actors to share their knowledge in sectoral working groups.

A practical example of this approach is the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) initiative, which emphasizes the necessity of aligning local efforts with national policies and global development agendas, thus facilitating effective resource mobilization to support community-led efforts.[60] Their work showcases the effectiveness of multi-level engagement in enhancing the impact and sustainability of humanitarianism.[61]

3.3 Territorialization

Area based approaches (ABAs) have gained traction in the last 15 years due to their perceived potential in fostering coordination and meeting interrelated needs, including through an HDP nexus approach.[62]

3.3.1 Area based approaches

Generally, ABAs target aid based on a territorial area, rather than a sector or specific group of people; provide multi-sectoral aid that considers the whole population of an area but targets assistance proportionate to needs and vulnerabilities; and involve multi-stakeholder engagement.[63] Several reviews of ABAs also highlight their participatory nature.[64] ABAs tend to be better grounded in the experiences of affected communities, who do not think of their needs and priorities in sectoral terms.[65] With ABAs, actors also have the opportunity to build on and contribute to strengthening existing social cohesion, capacity, governance structures, and service delivery systems in the target area.[66]

Actors may decide to employ ABAs because there are major, overlapping needs in a particular area, or because the particular area is one where multiple actors are already active, so there are built-in opportunities for coordination.[67] As such, actors often leverage ABAs to coordinate with other actors present in the target area to provide comprehensive aid collectively. In Fiji, for example, the organizations within the Australian Humanitarian Partnership that targeted the same communities found success in sharing and supporting each other's assessments, training CBOs together to promote their ownership over data collection, and coordinating with governments together to target and distribute aid.[68]

The multi-sectoral nature of ABAs is significant, because sector-based recovery efforts tend to be based on single-sector assessments and implementation, which are siloed, miss opportunities for multi-sectoral impact, and minimize the return on investments.[69] The Aga Khan Foundation, through its Multi-Input Area Development (MIAD) approach, prioritizes multi-sectoral integration, recognizing the interdependency of development sectors such as education, health, economic development, and infrastructure within specific geographic areas (see Comparative Table below). This area based, participatory strategy ensures that development interventions are holistic, sustainable, and tailored to the unique needs of each community.

3.3.2 Determinants of ABA suitability

ABAs are appropriate in areas with interrelated needs that cut across sectors but are not inherently the best modality and "should not necessarily be prioritized over other ways of targeting or coordinating assistance."[70] In particular, ABAs may be inappropriate in contexts with rapidly evolving conditions or where necessary local and international expertise is lacking.[71]

Humanitarians in particular continue to face a lack of clarity on or common understanding of how, when, or why to implement ABAs.[72] However, ABAs tend to be most effective where the population is relatively non-transient; there is a high concentration of needs; local and international actors with expertise and capacity are present, and a multi-sectoral coordination system already exists; and there is buy-in from the local government and projects are linked to regional or municipal response or development plans.[73]

Elements of success for ABAs include engaging with all affected groups in the target community from the beginning and in an ongoing manner; using multi-sectoral, multi-agency assessments to guide programming decisions; conduct multi-agency M&E; include sufficient time for relationship-building between stakeholders; and apply "iterative, flexible and adaptive approaches to programme design, management, funding and coordination."[74] Interestingly, as ABAs foster collaboration between multiple actors in a common area, they often naturally incorporate nexus approaches.[75]

Case Study: Improving Aid Delivery and Social Cohesion in Bangladesh
In 2018, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) collaborated with Caritas Bangladesh to trial an area based approach in improving shelter and living conditions within a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. CRS aimed to foster a partnership with the community, enhancing their existing capacities to centralize their role in decision-making and project implementation. CRS selected self-settled communities with shelter needs as their focus, consulting with the community to ensure their involvement. They identified the target area by geographical and community features, providing general aid and additional support for the most vulnerable families. Through comprehensive needs assessments—including household surveys, site and risk mapping, and focus groups—CRS tailored their project planning to address specific community vulnerabilities and disaster responses. The approach not only improved social cohesion but also empowered the community to better handle future issues.[76]

3.3.3 Strengthening territorial approaches

Lessons learned and good practices have emerged on ABAs. First, ABAs tend to take more time than traditional projects.[77] Actors should thus plan and budget for this accordingly. Second, the multistakeholder coordination platforms that ABAs commonly create or strengthen are effective in producing a coherent, common approach by establishing a shared understanding and vision, so diverse actors remain united by common priorities in delivering aid. Third, supporting communities to manage their own data collection results in a greater awareness of risks and ability to mitigate them locally. Fourth, project planning should be structured in phases that are adaptable to changes in the context and in a way that integrates short- and medium-term concerns into a longer-term plan. Fifth, local and international actors should work together to jointly determine response priorities and ensure adequate coordination.[78]

Actors engaged in ABAs have also identified ongoing challenges related to the political process of selecting territories and engaging government in that selection; "leaving behind" communities outside the target areas; triggering tensions and exacerbating inequalities between communities; conducting M&E, especially in a multistakeholder way; moving ABAs beyond piecemeal, short-term, and project-based efforts; putting the responsibility on local stakeholders where national or international action is necessary; or creating incoherence between local and regional response and development plans.[79;80;81;82;83]

3.4 Financing and Funding

In the face of the global funding gap between available resources and current humanitarian needs, financing can be either a key enabler of or major structural obstacle to providing effective aid for nexus, localization, or area based approaches. The OECD DAC recommendations marked a significant milestone in enhancing operational and policy coherence on the nexus. Emphasizing the necessity of diverse funding sources, the recommendations underscored the importance of developing evidence-based financing strategies and of coordinating and partnering among various stakeholders, including multilateral and private IFI partners. Regarding localization, although donors have developed new models to increase direct local financing (e.g. USAID), studies have found that there is still only a small percentage of funding channeled directly to local NGOs due to differences in the ways "local" is defined and funding is measured, but also due to the slow rate of progress in implementing the Grand Bargain.[84;85;86]

3.4.1 Risk aversity amongst funders

While most funders acknowledge the importance of the OECD DAC recommendations, they also recognize there is considerable distance left to cover.[87;88] Although international aid is most necessary in contexts facing complex crises and best practices emphasize funding prevention and preparedness, donors are slow and cautious to commit to financing in these contexts.[89]

This hesitation is evident in the distributions of ODA channeled to conflict-affected states, which is dominated by humanitarian aid.[90] Donors–particularly bilateral donors–are unwilling to provide significant funding in such high-risk environments, including "politically estranged situations," which face pressure from donor countries to withdraw development assistance, heightened political and media scrutiny, reduced diplomatic presence, and international sanctions.[91] Concerns over aid diversion, corruption, and limited access contribute to further wariness by donors. Although development partners globally have increased targeted financing for fragile and conflict-affected settings over the past decade, recently there has been a gradual decrease in development and peace funding in fragile contexts.[92] However, efforts are underway to mitigate financing risks in fragile contexts, including through innovative financing mechanisms, such as blended finance, which leverage public funding as a means of de-risking and crowd in private capital or the deployment of social impact bonds.[93] Other collaborative mechanisms include partnering with local financial intermediaries or utilizing pooled financing to co-finance.[94]

3.4.2 Predictable, flexible, and multi-year financing

Predictable, flexible, and multi-year financing mechanisms are considered the golden, albeit elusive, standard of financing for innovative, transformative approaches such as the nexus and localization.[95] While bilateral donors and the UN system have made efforts to adapt and align their financing practices to better support these innovative approaches, progress remains fragmented. Beyond issues over risk, reasons for this include ineffective coordination of financing streams due to a lack of cohesive financing strategies and the ongoing siloing of humanitarian, development, and peace projects. [96]

"Multilateral and bilateral funders claim commitment to nexus programming, flexibility, and agility, but in reality, humanitarian grant funding tends to be the least flexible, tied down to specific short-term interventions... here is the money, feed 200k people, the end." - INGO A

However, emerging innovations in financing are increasingly being leveraged by IFIs and bilateral donors. These include the establishment of new financing vehicles tailored to crises, such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa or France's Minka Fund.[97] These crisis-specific financing mechanisms have proven more effective at reaching communities than bilateral or multi-year partnerships with governments.[98]

Notably, novel ways of financing are necessary, but so is an improved utilization of existing funds.[99] Anticipatory funding, crisis modifiers, as well as blended and pooled financing and directly funding local partners, are promising tools or approaches in this regard. However, for pool funds to be effective they need to be backed by "dedicated management, analytical capacity, strategic focus and learning systems," and many stakeholders agree that there is limited donor interest in expanding significantly pooled funds.[100]

3.4.3 Financing requirements

There remains a conflict between community-led, adaptive programming and the rigid, bureaucratic demands required by donors.[101] Reporting demands and excessive pre-requisites for receiving funding, designed to limit risks related to mismanagement or corruption, effectively serve to eliminate many smaller local organizations from the recipient pool. This tension is exacerbated by the limited funding channeled directly to local organizations and for community-level initiatives. Consequently, financial frameworks restrict the degree to which initiatives can be genuinely locally driven and developed collaboratively. Additionally, the nature of donor-issued Requests for Proposals (RFPs), often coupled with a predefined agenda, and the financial pressures aid organizations face in securing contracts, frequently mean that donors define the programming focus before local actors determine their needs and priorities.

"The donor incentives run against a lot of the [nexus] ideology (...) donor incentives are centered on money; having heavy compliance and reporting requirements. (...) It skews [donors] away from innovation and creativity and risk-taking in terms of new methodologies." - INGO C

4. Comparing the AGORA methodology

4.1 Assessing the key components of AGORA

Acted's decision to incorporate the HDP nexus, territorialization, and localization into the AGORA methodology is aligned with what other aid actors and donors see as priorities for new ways of working, and is relatively unique in bringing these different frameworks together within one methodological approach. Additionally, AGORA's methodological components—coordination, flexibility, and a bottom-up approach—are consistent with ongoing learning in aid reform efforts that aim to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and accountability of aid delivery. The test of AGORA 2.0 will be how successfully the methodology can be implemented in practice, in light of broader challenges of operationalizing the HDP nexus and shifting power dynamics to elevate affected communities and local stakeholders.

This section of the report examines the foundational approaches of Acted's AGORA methodology and compares them with other best practices and frameworks used by aid organizations. The analysis focuses on identifying alternative methods for achieving goals related to the nexus, localization, and ABAs, and assessing which components of AGORA align with, or surpass, current practices. Additionally, it examines areas where AGORA is comparatively less developed compared to other contemporary practices.

The findings show that AGORA is particularly strong in the areas of grounding decisions in robust local knowledge and evidence bases and of building networks between local actors and international resources. However, generation of localized evidence and building up local capacities demand considerable time, potentially impacting the efficiency of aid delivery. This time-intensive process, crucial for enhancing the agency of local actors and supporting their leadership, may at times be operationally difficult to fully implement under limited timeframes, especially where project timelines are less than 3 years, necessitating realistic expectations and adjusted project planning and monitoring.

4.2 Putting the HDP Nexus into practice

The AGORA methodology represents a significant stride forward in Acted's effort to adopt a way of working aligned with the HDP nexus approach, and features many innovative and best practices. One of the most commendable elements of AGORA is its thorough practical guidance on implementation, which gives country offices significant clarity on the purpose and objectives of AGORA, as well as how it should be implemented (and adjusted) in a project setting. As such, AGORA is one of the most robust and detailed frameworks for implementing the HDP nexus, localization and community engagement by an INGO that the research team has identified.

4.2.1 Navigating divides between HDP pillars

AGORA explicitly recognizes that the humanitarian-development conceptual divide does not align with the reality of local priorities and needs on the ground. As such, AGORA's methodology of allowing local communities to determine their needs and the solutions required enables the flexibility of programming that is essential to bridging the divides between humanitarian and development programming. As such, the applicability of AGORA to a range of contexts and its focus on building long term resilience against shocks and vulnerability is in line with nexus approaches that emphasize greater coherence between development and humanitarian pillars.

However, AGORA's approach to integrating peacebuilding is not as pronounced. This is not an issue that is unique to AGORA and Acted. The ambiguity around how best to integrate the component of peace into the nexus is system-wide. In its capabilities around "identifying and addressing the local causes at the source of conflicts, in particular around the management of natural resources," Acted presents AGORA as complement to "traditional peacebuilding efforts."[102] However, the modality of the local interface and gathering of various local communities provides a strong foundation for AGORA to be used more explicitly in broader "small p" peacebuilding activities related to improving social cohesion and even community reconciliation.

Furthermore, in adopting a model that strays relatively far from traditional modalities, AGORA is a more risk-tolerant approach but currently lacks robust "Do No Harm" and conflict sensitivity considerations. Specifically, AGORA does not yet fully integrate mitigation measures for the conflict-associated risks, particularly with regards to sensitivities around bringing diverse groups together (particularly in conflict-affected areas) and community-led implementation (which may involve the selection and distribution of resources). Programmes such as the World Bank's Community Development Councils in Afghanistan have similar elements to AGORA's interface and illustrate how a lack of conflict integration can transform local collectives into sites of conflict and extraction over political power and resources.[103] Integration of both conflict analysis and situational monitoring throughout the lifecycle of the project are key approaches to avoid similar issues. These practices are often the mainstay of peacebuilding organizations, done in conjunction with community consultations, leveraging tools such as conflict tree, connector-divider, influencer mapping (see, for example, SFCG's Common Approach and Mercy Corps' Advancing Peace framework in the Comparative Table). Importantly, Acted HQ shared that the organization is aware of these concerns and in the process of developing resources and guidance on conflict sensitivity.

4.2.2 Engaging networks of local and international actors

A further strength of AGORA is its strong emphasis on linking project activities with national and local policies and frameworks. The direct guidance on ensuring collaboration with and buy-in of state actors – including through early consultation with government stakeholders – is particularly useful for building trust with authorities, enhancing the sustainability of the projects, and supporting state capacity. These considerations align strongly with best practices on state engagement across different levels. Many frameworks, including Oxfam's Framework for Rights, Resilience, Response and Agha Khan's MIAD Approach, integrate key partnership roles for local and national level actors as part of broader efforts to build government capacity and promote good governance. AGORA also takes some measures for adaption to different levels of state capacity, as demonstrated by the specific guidance on local engagement.[104] However, more specific guidance is

needed on best practices to engage productively where government authorities may be uncooperative or engage in corruption or abuse practices. Development and peacebuilding actors have increasingly developed new approaches, modalities instruments to work effectively in such contexts that may be helpful for Acted, including the OECD's *States for Fragility 2022* and Chatham House's Aid *Strategies in 'Politically Estranged' Settings*.[105]

AGORA further embeds itself as a progressive approach through its focus on building networks and its efforts to link local CSOs and groups with other international NGOs, donors, and UN agencies across the HDP nexus pillars, both vertically and horizontally. This approach is similar to that of organizations such as Peace Direct and Oxfam, who are increasingly integrating channels to give local CSOs and community representatives a "seat at the table", rather than speaking for them. These practices thus move away from the common practice of connecting local organizations solely with each other, with INGOs engaging separately in higher-level dialogues, which has limited impacts in supporting local organizations to become self-sustaining. Being a connector across the different layers of the aid sector in a country thus brings AGORA in line with efforts to go beyond horizontal coordination and provides an added value.

Nonetheless, there are some potential tensions in AGORA guidance related to network-building efforts. The guidance note for Activity 6 advises that "[w]here possible, IMPACT and Acted should strive to associate local representatives of the local interface, local governments and or partner CSOs, in engaging with potential external partners." Yet this note also highlights that "[l]ocal plans and priorities… promoted bilaterally with key donors, UN agencies, Multilateral Development Banks (MDB), private sector actors etc… [require] bilateral engagement, most often at capital level, that will require the mobilization of senior mission staff."[106] Though both approaches may be relevant and appropriate in different contexts and at different times, it is important to ensure that Acted and IMPACT prioritize and consistently work towards more localized ways of working across network-building efforts.

4.2.3 Reinforcing adaptability & flexibility

Another strength of AGORA is its adaptability to different types of contexts, as the methodology grounds programs in local knowledge and a strong evidence base tailored to each project area rather than having Acted pre-determine the entire project. This level of adaptability aligns with what the literature recommends for operationalizing the HDP nexus: that effective projects reflect community experiences and perspectives and contextual evidence-based knowledge.

However, where AGORA could be further strengthened is in incorporating flexibility into planning processes. Organizations are most effective when, in the face of a sudden crisis, they can quickly collect new data and agilely adjust programming to respond to new needs and priorities as identified by local communities. Given that the data collection and assessment process of AGORA is a relatively heavy lift, AGORA may run into challenges if a new crisis emerges, existing evidence becomes out of date, and it is not possible to repeat the data collection and analysis process to suit the new project context.

To further enable adaptability and flexibility, it is essential to ensure joint planning and information sharing between Acted and IMPACT across the project cycle so that the partner organizations can leverage their respective strengths and knowledge to collaboratively adjust

programming as needed. So far, the relationship between Acted and IMPACT appears to be strong and built on trust and mutual understanding. This relationship could be solidified and sustained through the creation of an AGORA Technical Coordinator position at country level, as the AGORA 2.0 internal guidance memo recommends. Notably, Acted HQ shared that they have identified the need to streamline the Acted-IMPACT coordination as a key lesson learned and have developed a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) resource to situate Acted-IMPACT collaboration within the framework of AGORA, which will include the Technical Coordinator position, as well as guidance on internal coordination mechanisms and collaborative arrangements within IMPACT-led research cycles. This SOP thus holds promise for strengthening the Acted-IMPACT relationship and enabling more agile programming.

4.2.4 Mainstreaming gender and climate

Although AGORA includes basic gender considerations in programme design—namely disaggregating data by gender and ensuring gender representation in interface make-ups—the AGORA project guidelines currently fall short of a gender transformative approach.[107] The Durable Peace Program led by Oxfam can be considered as an example of such an approach. By integrating "little p" peacebuilding into their strategy after immediate humanitarian needs had been addressed, Oxfam was able to spearhead societal change in regards to the position of women in society. By taking actions to support income generation for women and to promote social cohesion, they were able to begin the process of creating long lasting change and lifting women up in society.[108] The Initiative was able to create gender sensitive livelihood activities in communities and also change ideas within IDP camps in Myanmar about women's roles in society and increase women's empowerment.[109]

On climate change, however, AGORA is aligned with the growing recognition that aid must respond and adapt to the threats of climate change. By aiming to build up local capacities to enable sustainable, community-driven disaster risk reduction and natural resources management, AGORA has the potential to apply the framework of anticipatory action in an effective and meaningful way. Though at times AGORA seems to replace the third pillar of the nexus, "peace," with "environment," it is notable that AGORA is providing guidance for addressing tensions in locally driven solutions to environmental disasters. A further strength of AGORA is that it integrates Acted 3ZERO Houses, using network building to source locally driven ecologically suitable solutions.

4.3 Localization

In enabling communities to identify their own needs and priorities and implement interventions accordingly, AGORA stands out as an important model for shifting some power of decision-making and ownership to local actors, as the literature on localization calls on organizations to do.

4.3.1 Capacity building for local institutions

AGORA leverages local capacities by fostering governance, leadership, and project management skills, mirroring strategies found in successful models like the Aga Khan Foundation's Multi-Input Area Development (MIAD) approach. However, AGORA could further benefit from a deeper integration with local universities and academic institutes, whose knowledge, resources, and

expertise could be leveraged to tailor capacity-building initiatives even more closely to local needs. This partnership could enhance the sustainability of local systems, enabling them to independently manage development initiatives long-term, as has been achieved by MIAD's engagements.[110]

4.3.2 Strategic partnerships and decentralized coordination

The AGORA framework facilitates strategic partnerships and decentralized coordination, both critical elements that resonate with effective practices highlighted in literature. However, the structured multi-stakeholder forums, similar to those the OCHA Flagship Initiative implemented in Niger and the Philippines, could serve as a valuable model for AGORA. Such forums could enhance AGORA's effectiveness by ensuring that interventions are congruent with both national development strategies and the local socio-economic context, thereby maximizing the relevance and impact of its projects.[111]

4.3.3 Utilizing technology for enhanced community engagement

Technology plays a pivotal role in enhancing community engagement, extending beyond simple feedback mechanisms to actively involve communities in project design and evaluation. An illustrative example is World Vision's Last Mile Mobile Solutions (LMMS) technology. This digital tool not only tracks aid distribution but also engages communities in the monitoring and evaluation processes, ensuring transparency and accountability. By digitizing beneficiary registration and distribution management, LMMS allows for real-time data collection and sharing, enabling communities to directly shape and assess project impacts. This approach aligns with advanced community-based monitoring strategies, where technology empowers stakeholders to contribute effectively to project development and continuous improvement, ensuring interventions are responsive to the evolving needs of the community.[112]

4.3.4 Local knowledge production

AGORA utilizes local knowledge in its projects much like BRAC, which systematically integrates local agricultural practices into broader development initiatives. However, unlike BRAC's structured approach that systematically documents and leverages local innovations, AGORA's method appears less formalized. There is potential for AGORA to further refine its practices by adopting a more rigorous framework for local knowledge production. Doing so could enhance project outcomes, enriching AGORA's contributions to the global discourse on effective localization in development.[113]

4.4 Territorialization

4.4.1 Determining when and how to implement ABAs

Given that ABAs are not always appropriate or the most effective approach for aid, it is critical for Acted to ensure that AGORA is applied only in contexts where ABAs make sense and where many, if not all, enabling conditions for effective ABAs are present. A formal strategy or decision-making process to outline when and how to determine whether an AGORA project should be implemented in a new country would help ensure that Acted staff are aligned in their understanding of ABAs and guided in making consistent, informed decisions. That being said, such a strategy should be

thought of as a living document to allow for flexibility and adaptation as Acted learns through AGORA pilots what works or not.

Broadly, the literature emphasizes the relevance of ABAs in areas with a high concentration of interrelated needs as well as buy-in from local government authorities. Further, in deciding whether to implement an ABA, actors must transparently discuss "the proportion of the population that needs assistance, the type of programme contemplated, trade-offs between targeting cost and targeting accuracy, and the feasibility of targeting options."[114]

In a KII, Acted HQ reflected on the four contexts where AGORA is likely to work well: 1) informally governed spaces; 2) informal or urban settlements; 3) protracted displacement contexts; and 4) protracted crisis contexts with strong formal governance, though there are limitations in areas with active conflict. Learning on ABAs particularly validates the use of ABAs in second and third contexts, though the overlap between the four contexts in practice indicates a general alignment between Acted HQ's perspective and that of the literature. ABAs tend to be especially relevant in contexts of urban displacement, where area based aid provision can address the complex and interrelated needs of host and displaced communities while also building social cohesion.[115]

When asked about contexts where AGORA is relevant, IMPACT HQ responded that AGORA is best suited where Acted and IMPACT have a long-standing presence and pre-existing connections with local authorities; where flexible funding is available; and where there is interest in the country for localization at the state level. In an overarching strategy on deciding where to implement AGORA or not, all of these enabling conditions should be considered. Where not all conditions are present, Acted should make a clear-eyed decision on which conditions might prevent an effective AGORA project and which conditions could be adapted to.

As the experience of AGORA has demonstrated, a key element of deciding where ABAs are appropriate is assessing the right territorial scale and addressing potential challenges with working between administrative levels. However, the literature on ABAs appears limited on these issues. There is thus room for AGORA to meaningfully contribute to the literature by documenting best practices on these topics.

4.4.2 Leveraging ABAs for coordination and comprehensive aid

Though the AGORA methodology foresees a multi-sectoral response, in practice, certain projects are designed with a sectoral focus, and coordination is limited to avoiding duplication by identifying areas where other aid actors are not also implementing. Yet a primary advantage of ABAs is the way in which this approach fosters multi-sectoral coordination and response. As such, AGORA projects would benefit from strengthening coordination efforts to complement and leverage their interventions with those of other actors in the same target areas. Even where sectoral projects are the product of donor constraints or contextual specificities, coordination could collectively ensure a comprehensive, multisectoral response.

Coordinating with other aid actors in this way could also strengthen AGORA's flexibility. Experience has shown that strong relationships built on trust with partners in the field, as well as effective coordination with other NGOs, tend to support organizations in adapting to sudden context

changes. AGORA seems to benefit from strong local partnerships but may be better able to integrate adaptability by coordinating more deeply with other actors in the same areas. Proactive collaboration could involve using the unique data collection and analysis approach of AGORA to support other actors' interventions. Collective planning, programming, and information sharing could allow AGORA and other actors to more quickly and effectively adapt to context changes.

In focusing on the benefits of ABAs in enabling coordination (as well as localization), the literature does not seem to connect ABAs with the power of employing a solid evidence-based approach grounded in local knowledge. In this way, AGORA could serve as a model for moving beyond local engagement in data collection to implementing ABAs that advance local knowledge production and better ground interventions in contextual knowledge and traditional practices.

4.4.3 Identifying target areas and beneficiaries

In identifying the appropriate territorial scale for ABAs, the Urban Settlements Working Group found that ABAs can be implemented effectively at the city level, district/borough level, or ward/neighborhood level. The neighborhood-based scale, which seems to best align with AGORA's efforts to strike a micro-macro balance, is most common.[116] In line with best practices on ABAs, AGORA takes a specific approach to defining "territory" (taking into consider administrative, symbolic, and functional elements) and to identifying the right territorial scale of intervention (considering four criteria of program relevance, political acceptability, anchoring in existing socio-spatial features, and finding a balance between macro and micro to ensure meaningful engagement and scalability), in line with the AGORA Technical Guidance Note – Activity 1.

In targeting aid, Catholic Relief Services has taken a similar approach to Acted in targeting an entire territory through an ABA but complementing it with targeted assistance to the most vulnerable individuals and households within that area. Such an approach seems to be in line with the Urban Settlements Working Group guidelines, which call on aid actors to "consider appropriate standards of support" for the most vulnerable when determining response priorities.[117]

4.4.4 Planning and implementing ABAs in practice

In implementing a neighborhood-level ABA, most organizations broadly follow a four-step process: initiation; assessment and data collection; establish community center; and implementation and monitoring. This process of identifying general areas and conducting community-based assessments, then deciding on target areas, then implementing activities is broadly aligned with the steps of AGORA. However, AGORA's approach to establishing the local interface and then tasking the entity with identifying needs and priorities marks a divergence and perhaps provides a good practice in sequencing efforts to ensure that local partners are engaged before priorities are decided. Further, AGORA pursues monitoring as an ongoing, cross-cutting pillar, which may be key to remaining adaptive.

The community center is somewhat comparable to AGORA's local interface, as a common entry point for affected people to access information and services and for aid actors to coordinate. However, in Afghanistan, for example, the Norwegian Refugee Council led and ran the community center, rather than taking a facilitation role for local communities and stakeholders to take ownership and directly engage with project interventions. This finding seems to validate the

innovative nature of AGORA's local interface, learnings from which could benefit other aid actors in implementing ABAs.

4.5 Financing and Funding

4.5.1 Adjusting resource mobilization strategies

Considering that AGORA aims to "identify and implement relief, environmental, and development solutions through a nexus approach,"[118] and that AGORA projects typically span at least three years, the implementation of AGORA will require funding sources beyond institutional humanitarian funding. The latter is critical to ensure the longevity of AGORA projects and the capacity to be flexible and adapt to any crisis, particularly as AGORA is designed to work primarily in fragile settings. However, according to the 2022 "Acted Essential" report, approximately 94% of Acted's total resources for that year were sourced from subsidies and other public competitions, essentially constituting institutional funding.[119] Acted will need to tap into diverse financing mechanisms, beyond grants and contracts, to successfully implement the element of building networks between local actors and solutions with external resources.

Securing multi-year flexible funding from a diverse set of donors (including development and peacebuilding donors) is thus crucial. The call for increased multi-year humanitarian and development funding, with a focus on supporting local organizations, early action, and crisis prevention, has been enshrined in various policy commitments by donors and aid agencies, such as the Grand Bargain. [120;121] There is thus an opportunity for Acted to adapt its resource mobilization methods, diversify its funding streams, and leverage new funding opportunities, including innovative risk financing options, to avoid issues with traditional humanitarian funding.[122]

4.5.2 Diversifying funding sources

By diversifying its funding sources, Acted can lower operational costs and gain flexibility for early response, risk mitigation, increased capacity building, and resilience enhancement.[123] Donors have recently shown interest in engaging with innovative tools such as longer-term development awards and crisis modifiers. During a KII, USAID HQ confirmed they are looking to allocate 10% of budgets to respond to shocks. Further, the World Bank is launching new tools to assist developing countries in crisis response and preparedness. Additionally, SDC's approach is increasingly recognized for its decentralized support model and long-term commitment, which Acted could try to tap into.[124] If not already, Acted should participate in international convenings and technical spaces to learn and share best practices around financing, such as the "Financing for Development Forum" and "ALNAP 32nd Annual Meeting." Notably, Acted has recognized the challenges related to funding, and HQ staff highlighted that they are working to develop a strategy to diversify their donor base.

Additionally, AGORA's recommendation to mobilize the private sector as external actors with knowledge and capacity to co-develop interventions in a mutually beneficial relationship could be beneficial in helping to secure additional funding streams. Monitoring donors that are slowly starting to implement multi-year financing, including the Swiss, Norwegians, Germans, and ECHO, will also be important for Acted to further leverage new financing opportunities. [125]

An interesting comparison to Acted is the approach of World Vision and Save the Children, which mainly rely on their respective private funds for their long-term program implementation and financing. By relying on private financing, which tends to be more flexible, this funding set-up has enabled World Vision to implement 15-year projects, an inconceivable timeline for many INGOs but in line with what the literature recommends for localization and sustainability.

4.5.3 Adopting innovative methods and tools for flexible financing

AGORA's success is heavily dependent on its ability to be flexible and adapt to potential shocks, as it is operating mainly in fragile, conflict-ridden settings. Considering the latter, crisis modifiers (CMs) offer a promising funding mechanism, as they can be integrated into development programs in vulnerable areas to flexibly reallocate funding to respond to humanitarian needs and address emergencies more effectively.[126] A successful example is USAID's implementation of CMs in environments prone to shocks, where it injects emergency funds through existing development programs.[127] Further, Mercy Corps' PRIME program, funded by USAID, effectively activated a CM and was thus able to employ a markets-based and adaptive management approach to assist pastoralists in strengthening systems to address economic needs and climate adaptation concurrently, thereby enhancing resilience capacities. Another Mercy Corps program (RIPA) integrated innovative emergency responses into development programming even where a CM could not be activated.[128] RIPA's experience serves as a compelling example for Acted, which could embed emergency response activities and budgets within its development programs.

Redirecting funds could serve as an alternative approach for Acted to overcome the funding limitations that prevent it from effectively addressing emergencies and contextual changes, even though the impact of redirecting funds is more limited in scope and in scale than CMs. Other innovative financing risk options that ACTED could leverage include forecast-based finance, adaptive social protection, and contingency and rapid response funds, such as RAPID by USAID.[129]

Adaptive programming is also a new approach that has become rooted in the Western donor trend towards "doing development differently." Not a financing mechanism per se, adaptive programming implies new methods of finance allocation and delivery to support greater flexibility and adaptability to rapidly changing and complex environments.[130] Relatedly, procurement processes and management of infrastructure and logistic assets should have flexibility to allow for dual functions, so managers can allocate resources for emergency or longer-term response.

Interestingly, some organizations are experimenting with other methods to fund their humanitarian programs which Acted could explore, ranging from "crowdfunding and zakat to creating social enterprises; from an impact bond to encouraging private sector investment in refugees."[131] Further, Islamic Social Finance is considered to be "an under-utilized source to finance humanitarian action, with various mechanisms including zakat (mandatory alms-giving), sukuk (similar to social impact bonds), and waqf (a type of endowment)."[132] Pooled funds are increasingly important, including those that are NGO consortium-led, such as the START Fund, the NEAR network, and Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF).

4.6 Comparative frameworks to AGORA

Based on KIIs and publicly available information, this table summarizes the key elements of other aid actors' frameworks that are methodologically similar to AGORA. This table seeks to highlight what the HDP nexus, area based approaches, and localization mean to different organizations and what primary actions or tools these organizations are deploying to achieve their goals of delivering more effective, sustainable, and localized aid.

	Oxfam's Resilient Development, Rights Resilience Response (RRR)/One Programme Approach	World Vision's Fragile Context Programme Approach (FCPA)	Search for Common Ground's Common Ground Approach
Mandate	Multi-mandate organization	Multi-mandate organization	Peacebuilding organization

Approach of framework to HDP nexus	• The "One Program" approach brings together humanitarian and development knowledge to create a joined-up system capable of responding to current crises while also delivering deep, systemic and long-term change at scale that addresses root causes of crisis and vulnerability.
	• Oxfam pursues resilient and sustainable development that does not cause or increase risks, stresses, and volatility for people living in poverty.
		• FCPA works across the HDP nexus at scale in fragile contexts.
		• Characterized by the survive-adapt-thrive "dials": FCPA carries out work across three areas simultaneously if needed and makes adjustments in programming based on the evolving context, supported by a detailed context analysis:
		  ○ The "survive dial" seeks to meet immediate needs.
		  ○ The "adapt dial" to build stability and capacity to adapt.
		  ○ The "thrive dial" to mitigate risks and drivers of fragility.
		• Develops threshold indicators for shifting between different types of work.
		• Programs are integrated, multi-sectoral, and risk-informed
			• The Common Ground Approach views development and humanitarian aid as a tool for achieving stronger peace.
			  ○ Centered on "conflict transformation" through three key pillars: 1) conflict analysis, 2) behavior transformation, 3) conflict sensitivity
			  ○ Core conflict analysis tools include: conflict tree, connector-divider, influencer mapping
			• Identifies shared interests across dividing lines, whether they are development, humanitarian, or environmentally focused, to achieve collaborative solutions.
			• Shared interests constitute "entry points" to catalyze broader structural changes that address root causes of conflict.

Approach of framework to area based approaches	N/A	N/A	N/A

Approach of framework to localization and community-driven methods	• The Vulnerability and Risk Assessment (VRA) methodology takes a systemwide view of the drivers of risks and vulnerability, enhances women's empowerment, and engages multiple stakeholders in identifying and working towards shared solutions.
	  • VRA aims to develop collaborative relationships between women and men, communities, civil society, the private sector and different levels and sectors of government.
	• RRR enables communities, staff, and partners to lead and drive change by investing in local expertise, and shifting power to them
	• Emphasizes unrestricted funding so communities having more reliable access to the resources they need, and local leadership has flexibility to decide how the money is best used.
		• FCPA prioritizes engagement with communities in the design, implementation, and exit phases of projects, aiming for high accountability and ensuring that interventions are rooted in local realities.
		• Local staff conduct rigorous (& prolonged) consultation with communities in the design stage.
		• Participatory context analysis helps address tensions between efficiency and resilience, allowing for rapid and flexible program adjustments.
			• Local communities are the central agents of the approach, empowered through "listening, empathy, and common analysis and transformation tools" to address conflicts.
			  • SFCG's role is primarily to facilitate as "impartial advocates of a process."
			• Local ownership of the project and process is a central enabling condition for effective cross-division collaboration.
			• Inclusivity is a precondition for success; all members of a community (including those potentially at risk of or having engaged in violence) should participate.
			• Local knowledge and "culturally relevant" methods are prioritized to set trends, shift norms, and facilitate collaboration.

Organization/ framework's partnership and coordination methods	Focuses on facilitating multi-stakeholder processes, including: • enhancing the capacity of marginalized and vulnerable people to use their voice, knowledge and power in collaborative decision making; • supporting national civil society to	• FCPA emphasizes collaboration with various partners, including NGOs, local CSOs, and government bodies, with the goal of creating comprehensive interventions. • Collaboration involves navigating differences in commitment to agility	• Primary partnership is with and amongst the target community. • Influencer mapping is used as a core tool to identify non-traditional partners within communities.

	share knowledge and organize together; ● designing processes that facilitate links between stakeholders; ● convening and facilitating special events, such as multiple stakeholder scenario-planning workshops ● convening national platforms which enable stakeholders to create shared visions and solutions and meet regularly to learn and support change processes.	and operational capacities.	
Sustainability	● Resilient development is directly addressing the sustainability of programs by building the capacities of local communities and empowering them in the implementation of good practices to the creation and strengthening of their livelihoods. They secure and build human, social, natural, physical and financial capital and household assets, based on the sustainable livelihoods framework.	● Private financing allows for sensible risk taking. ● Project timeframe of ~15 years is key. ● One of the few approaches committed to continuous and rigorous monitoring to be capable of flexibly adjusting activities/programs when needed. ○ Specific indicators related to key areas like children's rights, education, health, and environmental factors are monitored to assess progress. ● Success is measured through the ability to adapt to changing contexts and the sustainability and impact of interventions.	● Shared success in finding local solutions to meet common interests amongst parties enables long-term trust-building. ● The approach is defined by commitment to long-term engagement that maintains incentives for ongoing engagement by all parties. ● Establishment of incentives is key for replication by both individuals and institutions; incentives are promoted as "cost-effectiveness of collaboration as opposed to adversarial approaches."

	Mercy Corps's Advancing Peace in Complex Crises (APCC) Initiative	Islamic Relief's Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (STRIDE)	Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)'s Multi-Area Input Development (MIAD) Approach[133]
Mandate of the organization	Multi-mandate humanitarian organization also covering development and peace	Faith-based multi-mandate organization undertaking relief and development work	Multi-mandate organization integrating humanitarian emergency response, sustainable development, and conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts
Approach of framework to HDP nexus	• APCC emphasizes the peacebuilding component of the nexus and specifically ties peacebuilding to development as a means to address root causes. • The focus on humanitarian action is more limited/streamlined. • Conflict sensitivity is the first step to applying a nexus approach. • Bridging the HDP divide is about responding to community needs no matter which category they fall into.	• STRIDE has a core focus on enhancing institutional capacity in disaster preparedness and fostering local partnerships. • STRIDE aims to strengthen delivery of effective and efficient humanitarian responses, drawing on best practices and concepts of resilience and DRR. • Four key components of STRIDE: enhanced preparedness at the global level in line with internal quality management framework, Ihsan; strengthening humanitarian capacity of country offices and local actors; integration of DRR approach into humanitarian programming; shared learning and acknowledge management. • STRIDE advocates for appointing dedicated humanitarian leads in all high-risk countries in which Islamic Relief has country offices.	• MIAD works to stabilize communities by addressing the root causes of conflict and poverty through long-term development initiatives rather than short-term humanitarian aid. • MIAD engages in peacebuilding through programs that promote social cohesion, conflict resolution, and economic opportunities, aiming to address underlying tensions and prevent conflicts.
Approach of framework to area based	N/A	• STRIDE frames localization as key for accessing territories, particularly where Islamic Relief does not have a presence	• AKDN targets areas where people of the Ismaili faith historically live or used to live, but within these areas provides

approaches (ABA)		or operates with a limited structure. As such, target areas are identified with strong consideration for capacities of local actors. • Within DRR, STRIDE adds value by mapping hazards and vulnerabilities to ensure strategic priority areas.	aid to all people regardless of faith. • Focusing on specific, underserved areas, MIAD addresses complex challenges to maximize community-wide benefits. • MIAD takes a multi-sectoral/sector integration approach to development, including through integrated rural development projects that address agriculture, health, education, and economic development.
Approach of framework to localization and community-driven methods	• APCC is committed to localization in the sense of promoting local ownership and empowerment. • APCC aims to co-design projects and invest in capacity strengthening (beyond training partners to carry out a specific project). • APCC is working with community leaders and local mediators. • The motto of APCC is "Putting local communities first."	• Localization is identified as a "key focus" within STRIDE, covering three areas: presence countries, non-presence countries, and existing local partners. • STRIDE emphasizes genuine, inclusive localization in target regions. • A key tool within the framework: context-specific and inclusive Capacity Self-Assessments (CSAs), which serve as the starting point for STRIDE's development of improvement pathways. • STRIDE is explicitly aligned with the commitment of the Grand Bargain 2.0 and the principles outlined in the Charter for Change.	• MIAD prioritizes community engagement and ownership in every phase of the project cycle, from planning to implementation and evaluation, ensuring that projects are community-driven and aligned with local needs and priorities. • MIAS focuses on building the capacities of local institutions, civil society organizations, and community groups to lead, manage, and sustain development initiatives.

Organization/ framework's partnership and coordination methods	• The cluster system provides APCC opportunities for coordinating with other humanitarians. • Building relationships based on trust is key to local partnership.	• STRIDE emphasizes coordination and engagement vertically and horizontally, with strategic meetings at headquarters, regional, and country office-levels. • Collaboration with international donors is built into workstreams. • STRIDE emphasizes the development of common understanding and integration of common terminology. • STRIDE uses Islamic faith-based values to build ties with communities at risk of humanitarian crises and provide pathways out of poverty.	• MIAD forms strategic partnerships across sectors with governments, NGOs, private sector players, and international development agencies to pool resources, expertise, and influence for broader impact. • MIAD coordinates closely with local governments and communities while also aligning with global development agendas and networks to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication of efforts.

Sustainability	• APCC aims for sustainable impact through a focus on livelihoods, building long-term capacities.
	• APCC shifts programming as needs evolve over time rather than planning for an exit strategy.
	• APCC is investing in human resources, including how to overcome bridges between areas of expertise.
	• APCC is continuously reviewing methods for measuring success, employing double-loop learning.
		• STRIDE offers a "transformative approach" to facilitate implementation of framework, breaking down the approach into four "parcels' that link with broader strategies:
		  • 1) vision and will; sensitizing stakeholders to ensure ownership
		  • 2) environment; creating environment for change
		  • 3) understanding purpose, process, and using common terminologies
		  • 4) application; capacity strengthening grants, integrating Ihsan, partnerships
		• STRIDE projects are expected to be 48 months long in duration.
			• MIAD is encouraging economic self-reliance through support for income-generating activities, access to finance, and market development.
			• MIAD is integrating environmental sustainability into projects, promoting natural resource management, conservation practices, and climate change adaptation measures
			• MIAD is working on strengthening local institutions and governance structures to ensure the long-term sustainability of development gains.

5. Assessing AGORA in Sri Lanka

5.1 Overview

Acted is applying the AGORA methodology to a project titled "Promoting DRR for livelihood resilience via community-led, area based approaches in Sri Lanka," in partnership with IMPACT. This project is funded by USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) from July 2023 to June 2025. The project's areas of intervention are clusters of about 3-4 *Grama Niladharis Divisions* (GNDs), and it is being implemented in partnership with local NGO CEFE Net. The project aims to support approximately 9,889 individuals and to reduce community vulnerability to disasters. Whilst specific activities will be determined with the local interfaces, the project will feature livelihood resilience planning, DRR training, and grants to CBOs and vulnerable households.

At the time of the research team's visit to Sri Lanka in March 2024, the project had worked on four of the six core AGORA activities. Acted had identified clusters of GNDs as the territorial entry point (activity 1). IMPACT largely completed the Area Based Risk Assessment (ABRA) to map, profile, and assess the target territories (activity 2), pending the final presentation of findings. Acted began mobilizing the local interfaces (activity 3). The IMPACT team was in the process of completing the Livelihood Risk Assessment (LRA), and the Acted team was facilitating local interface meetings for the purposes of participatory needs and priorities identification (activity 4). The project had not yet begun implementation (activity 5) or efforts to foster external support for local solutions (activity 6). Acted was laying the groundwork to build up local capacity (activity 7) through training conducted by CEFE Net and through the local interface. For learning, impact assessment, and monitoring (activity 8), Acted organized one community-led monitoring session in the North, but overall, work had yet to be undertaken.

Although the guidance for AGORA recommends that projects be implemented over three years or more, the project duration in Sri Lanka is two years. Whilst there is confidence amongst staff that the project can be completed within this timeframe, they also highlighted that it will require an extremely heavy lift, with teams accelerating implementation to meet key milestones. A compressed project timeline risks rushing the execution of the methodology, requiring sustained attention to avoid gaps in implementation.

5.2 Pillar I: Identifying and profiling territories

5.2.1 Identifying the territorial entry point

Clustering GNDs
The identification of GNDs within the four target districts was based on:
- Acted's operational presence and past experience implementing aid in Sri Lanka;
- Staff knowledge of which areas have the highest levels of risk and vulnerability;

- Staff knowledge that the GND level is so small that interventions would be too limited, but the next administrative level (division) is too large, so a cluster of GNDs (which represent a shared resource area) is the best territorial scale; and
- Strategic inputs from the donor and partners in Sri Lanka.

The clustering of GNDs has been well-received by local communities. Multiple interviewees emphasized that the clustering allows them to work on shared challenges and augments their capacity to address common problems by pooling resources and technical knowledge and expanding their local support networks.

Co-selection of territories

The selection of GNDs was based on findings from the ABRAs, consultations with stakeholders and communities, and a mapping of other aid actors to avoid duplication of efforts. A key strength of the project was the decision to work with district-level authorities to select the Divisional Secretary's Divisions (DSDs) for the project's target areas. This co-selection aligned with AGORA guidance to work with and integrate local governance into AGORA projects, thereby ensuring authority awareness and buy-in of the project and its goals. According to Acted staff, government actors did not push back on the cluster of GNDs as the territorial entry point but did wish to input on which GNDs were chosen. Acted field staff found they could respond effectively to such requests by relying on the data collected by IMPACT and requesting that local authorities provide additional data and evidence to justify their nominations. These staff thus found that the evidence-based approach enhanced the informed selection of project areas by local authorities. In one area, local authorities reported in interviews that they recognized Acted's particular strength as delivering strong evidence-based projects. These local authorities requested training on conducting data collection and analysis, a promising sign that there is will to eventually take ownership of these steps.

5.2.2 Mapping, profiling, and assessment of territories

Assessing territories with ABRA and LRA

The ABRA process in Sri Lanka faced challenges that are reportedly common to many other AGORA projects. Firstly, the ABRA profiles relied primarily on primary data held by the local authorities, which were often incomplete or required a time-consuming administrative process to access. Furthermore, the start of the ABRA was delayed by a month, as the consultative selection of Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSD) took longer than initially envisaged due to extensive negotiations between Acted and local authorities, engagement which is essential to the success of AGORA. Nevertheless, this activity is now on track per the project work plan.

Secondly, the rigor of IMPACT's methodology provides a critical added value but also demands a long timeline (roughly 8 months) that seemed to the research team to be at odds with the shorter project timeline in Sri Lanka. Acted and IMPACT staff explained that the timeline of the research component is agreed at the proposal stage, and for this project, the research timeline is broadly in line with the project work plan. To stay on track, the Acted team decided to begin planning out interventions before the ABRAs and LRAs were completed, thereby undermining the order of the

AGORA methodology. Staff in Sri Lanka emphasized that this decision was operationally necessary given the constraints of the project. However, this will likely impact the ability to take full advantage of the research in terms of informing the project so that interventions are evidence-based rather than predetermined. Even so, Acted did plan in close and regular consultation with IMPACT, using information and data from the ABRAs once available rather than waiting until the final ABRA reports were finalized. As such, the Acted team endeavored to ensure evidence-based decisions to the extent possible, despite timeline challenges.

Moreover, while the ABRA and LRA will generate significant and rigorous local knowledge, from the perspective of the research team, the fact that the LRA findings will be only shared in June 2024, nearly halfway into the project, constitutes a limitation in terms of "developing robust context-specific local knowledge in the form of an understanding of local socio-economic dynamics" as highlighted in AGORA Technical Guidance Note – Activity 3. This challenge does not appear to be fully mitigated by the presence of competent local staff members who have a comprehensive understanding of Sri Lankan socio-economic dynamics. However, Acted and IMPACT staff reported that the current LRA timing is aligned with the project work plan; that some of the activities that Acted had been implementing to date did not generally require the LRA findings; and that in the cases where LRA information or data was needed, Acted and IMPACT coordinated to use available data wherever possible. Acted and IMPACT staff have thus made clear efforts to mitigate such challenges, even as they recognize that a longer timeframe would have been preferable.

Finally, the lack of formal conflict sensitivity analysis raises questions on how Acted and IMPACT can ensure the knowledge necessary for this pillar of work. Within the LRA, it is critical to consider integrating a proper section on conflict sensitivity/analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context in which the project is being implemented, and the potential crises, and spoilers that may arise. Otherwise, there could be critical gaps in knowledge that could undermine the project. Notably, Acted and IMPACT staff in Sri Lanka stated that conflict sensitivity analysis would be best carried out as part of the project's inception phase, rather than as part of the LRA.

Maintaining relevance of data

Sri Lanka has undergone many recent economic and political changes and faced environmental disasters. The fluidity of the situation and the potential for sudden and significant contextual changes to project areas could undermine the value of the underlying data of IMPACT's assessments during the lifecycle of the project, unless there is sufficient flexibility in programming and the potential to update assessments and program focus where needed. The project does not have a formalized document detailing a risk mitigation strategy, which would further enable the project team to respond accordingly to such changes, ensuring project feasibility and maintaining community priorities. However, Acted staff in Sri Lanka emphasized that flexibility is built into the design of the project, in terms of the geographic scope and ability to switch from DRR to response funding as needed, which has allowed Acted to successfully implement programming throughout the economic crisis. Further, staff highlighted their strong relationship with the donor's focal point in Sri Lanka, with whom they maintain regular communication and are already proposing adjustments based on feedback and emerging issues on the ground as Acted implements.

Coordinating on and in project areas for knowledge-sharing and collective action

In Sri Lanka, Acted has taken important steps to coordinate with other organizations undertaking DRR projects. Notably, Acted staff reported that they are coordinating with WFP, who are working on capacity building on DRR at the national level and improving coordination between national and local level authorities. Additionally, Acted staff reported that 70 institutions directly contributed to the ABRA and LRA, including five local NGOs, 61 local authorities, and four UN agencies. Furthermore, upon publication of the ABRA and LRA analyses, Acted and IMPACT will organize one event at each DSD in June 2024 to present findings and generate dialogue to promote interest and action for DRR measures within the respective territories, particularly among CSOs, CBOs, government actors, local communities, UN agencies, national NGOs and INGOs. Moreover, reports will be made available at public offices at the GND and DSD level for community reference and use, and ABRA maps will be made available on IMPACT's online resource center and published on other national online platforms. These efforts will support strong knowledge management.

Nevertheless, there remain opportunities to deepen coordination. For example, Acted staff and other INGO representatives in Colombo reported that they participate in the Quarterly INGO Forum and that the USAID funded DRR partners also have periodic meetings, but that these are limited to sharing updates rather than leveraging strategic coordination. Coordination could move beyond this to sharing evidence collected and lessons learned and to leveraging each other's connections to stakeholders and communities. Such coordination could complement and even strengthen the outcomes of the LRA and interface meetings.

In interviews, many community members reported familiarity with the NGOs Sarvodaya and Sevalanka. Additionally, the government-run Samurdhi programs on poverty reduction seemed to be present in most of the project's target areas. Through proactive collaboration and partnership-building, these three entities could support Acted in identifying the most vulnerable people in target communities and generating community buy-in.

Further, in identifying project territories, Acted has made important efforts to reduce and prevent duplication with other INGOs that are working on DRR and to work with communities that might have been left behind by previous aid efforts. However, there are important opportunities in coordinating with other actors who have been or are active in the AGORA project's target areas, in terms of knowledge sharing and complementary assistance.

Acted and IMPACT staff in Sri Lanka reported that they attempt to link into UN mechanisms where possible, but there have not been many opportunities to do so for this project. Acted and IMPACT are actively involved in the Humanitarian Country Team as well as various working groups when they are active, but currently these bodies seem to be dormant. The Humanitarian Country Team has not met since July 2023, when the project began.

In the absence of UN-led humanitarian coordination mechanisms, Acted could benefit from alternative humanitarian coordination mechanisms like BHA-led knowledge-sharing spaces. Such efforts must be accompanied by strong coordination with national and local authorities by aligning

the projects with development plans and creating rapport, especially given government officials were pleased with Acted's work and seemed open to further collaboration.

5.3 Pillar II: Locally driven participatory needs and priorities identification

5.3.1 Mobilizing the local interface

Local interface as a key strength of the AGORA methodology

The field research revealed that the local interface is one of the foundations of AGORA, as it facilitates the inclusion, representation, and meaningful engagement of all community members. Communities in Sri Lanka recognized that the interface is effective because common needs bring people together, so interface members can learn from each other, contribute to solving collective problems, and bridge the gap of differences. While engagement across GNDs existed informally beforehand, such coordination emerged in an ad hoc manner in response to specific disasters. As such, formalizing the concept through AGORA enables a more proactive and systematic process to organize, coordinate, and build resilience.

In Sri Lanka, the local interface includes local government authorities, community leaders, CBOs which include both women's and men's rural development organizations, and farmers' and fishers' societies. Interviews indicated that Acted has effectively set expectations and used clear language to ensure that interface members are well informed about their roles and responsibilities, laying the groundwork for an effective community-driven implementation stage. In both the East and North, all members of the local interface (including CBOs, GNDs, and community leaders) are aware of the function of the interface as well as their roles within it. Seven groups of various local interface members and at least three individual members confirmed that they understand the purpose of the interface in identifying and implementing locally identified response priorities. Further, when prompted, four focus group discussions in the East and three in the North confirmed an understanding of the structural set-up of the interface as well as the limitations related to donor parameters.

Additionally, interviews confirmed the successful establishment of a two-way communication mechanism to ensure constant communication between Acted field officers and local communities. Notably, the role of local Acted staff, working as facilitators by embedding themselves in communities and establishing relationships of trust, has allowed the team to gain valuable information from communities and serve as a key entry point for communication and follow up.

By facilitating meetings between community leaders from multiple GNDs, AGORA is not only empowering these leaders to identify challenges in their own communities but also enabling knowledge exchange between them. Additionally, involving local government representatives, especially those involved in DRR, has been critical. In the East, two Acted staff and three local interface members highlighted that the interface provided an opportunity for communities to

speak directly to local authorities, who are often hard to reach during and after disasters. There is thus hope that the interfaces will secure greater communication with and buy-in by authorities.

Moreover, by bringing communities together through the local interface, the AGORA project may even result in knock-on effects beyond disaster risk reduction. For example, one women's rural development society shared that they are already brainstorming ideas to expand collective action beyond the project, by leveraging the new relationships of the interface to support each other in other areas of life.

However, the lack of formal conflict sensitivity analysis raises questions on how Acted can ensure the knowledge necessary for this pillar of work. Per the AGORA Technical Guidance Note – Activity 3, the appropriate engagement modality should be identified by "developing robust context specific local knowledge in the form of an understanding of local socio-economic dynamics." In Sri Lanka, local knowledge seems to come from individual staff members. Complementing local staff knowledge with formal conflict analysis could help improve the project design by providing further insights into the socio-economic dynamics in targeted territories.

Ensuring attendance of local interface members

Currently, the primary challenge to mobilizing local interfaces is ensuring full attendance and ongoing participation. To attend interface meetings, members generally have to give up time that would usually be dedicated to making earnings for the day. Interviews with Acted staff in the Eastern and Northern provinces and members of the local interface highlighted that insufficient compensation for members' travel expenses and livelihood losses poses significant obstacles to their active engagement. In one focus group discussion in the East, local interface members noted that rotating meeting locations each month helped to make them more accessible overall, which is important but does not seem to have sufficiently mitigated the risk of low or unreliable attendance. One interviewee strongly recommended that Acted compensate not only travel expenses but also the loss of daily earnings in order to secure participation. While a number of Acted staff agree, others shared concerns that such financial incentives might mean that interface members be motivated by financial gain rather than a commitment to the project's objectives, which could undermine the interface's effectiveness and sustainability.

Prioritizing administrative & advocacy training for interface members

Some of the requests and needs of communities fall beyond the scope of the project. As such, advocacy training is imperative to ensure that local stakeholders possess the skills and tools to advocate for change on issues that the AGORA project cannot address and that remain the government's responsibility, including infrastructure and land resource management. Such training could equip CBOs to navigate coordination among different government bodies, including those not represented on the interface, such as the Department of Wildlife and Conservation (DWC), and secure the integration of grassroots DRR or wider activities into government plans. In addition, CBOs in the North and East expressed a desire to develop their administrative skills to prepare proposals effectively and confidently for the interface.

Ensuring the sustainability of the local interface

A primary challenge to the sustainability of the local interface is the project's limited timeframe. Several local staff emphasized the need for a longer period to ensure inclusive participation of all members and effective capacity building of the interface. A further challenge is the lack of formalization or institutionalized government support. The AGORA Technical Guidance Note – Activity 3 suggests that in a "fully developed rational-bureaucratic state," Acted and IMPACT should engage with or build upon existing formal (or de facto) governance actors at "the level of the chosen territorial entry point." In Sri Lanka, the territorial entry point identified by Acted was deemed to be the most appropriate, even though it did not align with formal administrative boundaries. Acted and IMPACT staff recognize the need to work with formal authorities across divisions to manage the fact that the local interfaces sit in between two administrative levels (the GNDs and the DSDs), so there may be challenges integrating the interface effectively into the existing state infrastructure. These efforts will be important, as many interviewees reported that they would like to see the local interface continue, and authorities are reportedly largely supportive of the approach taken.

In the East, the primary proposal to address this concern was to register the local interface as an independent entity to ensure its long-term viability. However, staff in the North raised concerns that Sri Lanka already has numerous existing committees, potentially leading to duplication. Additionally, bureaucratic obstacles to registration, such as the requirement to register the interface under a specific department (despite the fact that it may be working on cross-cutting issues) and the need to demonstrate funding may prevent the interface members from successfully completing the registration process. A proposed alternative was for Acted to organize yearly meetings with the local interface after the project ends and conduct annual evaluations. These meetings could help transform the local interface into a hub of local experts capable of addressing community issues through evaluation, connection, and coordination.

Regardless of the approach taken to ensure the sustainability of the local interface, according to an Acted staff member in the North, securing the participation of local members necessitates successfully linking at least one CBO to an external donor before the project's conclusion. This achievement would underscore the importance of the local interface and incentivize continued participation and engagement. In other words, funding is critical to the sustainability of the local interface beyond the project timeframe.

5.3.2 Participatory needs and priorities identification

Enabling participatory approaches

That Acted was able to secure USAID funding for the project without completely pre-determining project activities is an essential first step to implementing a participatory approach. Of course, Acted does need to follow certain parameters in using this funding, but there is significant flexibility that the Sri Lanka team believes will allow for a participatory approach. This achievement indicates that the AGORA project reflects a genuine commitment to localization in the

sense of shifting decision-making power and not just channeling funds to national organizations and traditional partners.

Facilitating a truly participatory approach will be grounded in the relationships between Acted staff and target communities. Acted staff are often from the communities that they are serving, and if not, they have lived in the community before or during the implementation of the project to gain a thorough understanding of needs. Though the project remains in the early stages, the current strong relationship between Acted and communities indicates promise in terms of assuring a participatory approach.

Improving the language of the LRA for better data collection

LRA surveys sometimes contain terminology specific to the humanitarian community, the meaning of which the local community members may interpret differently from those crafting the surveys. Simplifying the language of the LRA, as well as broader explanations of AGORA, could thus be beneficial. General staff training on AGORA should cover how to translate technical jargon into plain language better suited for participatory data collection.

Meeting community priorities with action

Based on interviews with CBOs, two priority areas emerged for AGORA interventions: providing basic infrastructure, especially regarding irrigation and drainage issues; and income generation, such as providing additional resources for women's rural development societies, whose loan programs both support community members through fluctuations in livelihoods and contribute to promoting gender equality. Additionally, there is a desire for interventions that benefit the entire community rather than specific households or individuals, such as providing a reliable source of water to enable livelihoods.

The main mechanism to ensure action towards these needs is to fund the projects the interfaces propose, align interventions with government action to ensure complementarity, and look for medium- to long-term solutions, such as additional funding. A significant challenge to this end is a gap in responsiveness by government authorities or their lack of resources. In the project's target areas, local authorities may provide assistance after emergencies but invest less in mitigation and preemptive action. In one area, for example, local officials rejected a request to repair damaged irrigation tanks that could soon rupture and cause flooding. As a result, communities are looking for non-government solutions to their needs, presenting a gap for Acted to fill but complicating efforts to secure government ownership. This creates an opportunity for Acted to conduct preemptive activities and prove to the government how much time and resources are saved by acting before an emergency happens, ideally securing government adoption of DRR programs.

5.4 Pillar III: Implementation of local response priorities

5.4.1 Implement locally identified response priorities

As the project had not yet begun implementation at the time of the fieldwork, assessment of this pillar is limited. Nevertheless, AGORA's engagement with the local interface and partnership with CEFE Net demonstrate the characteristics of effective localization, which is promising for meeting the goal of implementing community driven response. AGORA's commitment to participatory methods is particularly important in light of interviews with two national NGOs, who emphasized that problematic dynamics within aid partnerships persist, as INGOs too often display attitudes of superiority; act like a donor, imposing their own requirements; and confine local NGOs to "implementing partner" status without shifting the center of decision-making. Importantly, CEFE Net reported a positive relationship with and perception of Acted, indicating that Acted is following good practices in fostering partnerships based on trust and mutual respect. It will be important for Acted to continue respecting and centering the expertise of CEFE Net, as well as the valuable local know-how that local interface members and CBOs possess.

Given that implementation had not yet started, one idea that emerged from the interviews was to consider implementing initial, small-scale interventions during Pillar I and Pillar II activities. Given that the needs of target communities are so high, and the demands of participating in consultations and assessments can be significant, providing some assistance earlier in the project cycle could demonstrate respect and commitment to communities as well as mitigate the timeline challenge of only beginning implementation once the ABRAs and LRAs are complete. Further, preliminary interventions could potentially enable IMPACT to more easily access information, due to the resulting goodwill built with communities.

Finally, it is important to note that expectations by community members for what AGORA can deliver are now quite high. One community leader and one local interface member in the East, and one local interface member and one group of members in the North, noted that Acted is different from other NGOs in that they place greater emphasis on asking communities what they actually need and follow through. This perception is a promising start, demonstrating that Acted has taken steps to foster positive, mutually beneficial relationships that will serve them well during implementation. Successfully implementing AGORA in the way it has been presented to communities could thus significantly strengthen trust and acceptance among affected communities and relevant stakeholders.

5.4.2 Promote local priorities and solutions to foster external support

Though the fieldwork could not yet assess progress against this goal, the essential importance of this work was clear. As the AGORA project aims for long-term sustainability and ownership, a major challenge will be the lack of government resources to take on the necessary level of DRR and livelihood resilience strengthening. To assess the project's progress in addressing this obstacle will require greater clarity on how Acted plans to connect CBOs in Sri Lanka with external donors and partners to address this obstacle. Further, the lessons of other organizations with similar aims demonstrate that it can be difficult to move beyond simply making the connection between organizations to truly fostering ongoing support.

5.5 Cross-Cutting Pillars

5.5.1 Build up local capacity

Local communities and authorities communicated a desire for capacity building and training, confirming the relevance of this AGORA pillar. One Division-level Disaster Management Center (DMC) interview, for example, highlighted the necessity for training in areas of search and rescue, firefighting, first aid training, and camp management, further validating the project's plan to deliver DRR-specific training. For communities, capacity building was linked to livelihood-related needs. At least three groups of local interface members emphasized the need for training for suitable self-employment and support in developing agricultural skills, with targeted efforts to include women and disabled individuals. In this light, the AGORA project's focus on livelihood resilience generally is in line with what communities identify as a primary need given ongoing disasters: reliable sources of income.

Further, a critical component of building local capacity will be building and maintaining partnerships with government officials. Despite the emphasis of Acted staff in developing personal connections with individual GNs, turnover is inevitable. Creating formal training modules, knowledge transfer mechanisms, and handover processes and materials could mitigate the delays that such turnover can cause. These partnership efforts should also focus on trying to bridge the local level engagement with national authorities, given the importance for the sustainability of the project.

5.5.2 Learning, Impact Assessment, and Monitoring

The piloting, for the first time, of a Community Led MEAL component in the Sri Lanka project is a promising practice for further putting affected communities at the center throughout the AGORA projects. It will be important for AGORA teams to closely monitor progress within this component to be able to disseminate key learnings and best practices for both other AGORA projects and other aid actors to consider incorporating a community-led MEAL approach in their work.

The BHA Indicator Tracking Table for the project outlines a monitoring system designed to measure a variety of outcomes through an extensive use of quantitative metrics, which is essential for assessing the scope and reach of the project's activities. However, these quantitative measures may not fully capture the depth of community engagement or effectiveness of training in practical, everyday contexts. Incorporating qualitative measures could involve detailed community feedback mechanisms that evaluate the relevance and applicability of the training provided, and how these teachings translate into improved local practices.

It would also be beneficial to refine indicators to more closely monitor the influence of community feedback on project direction and outcomes. This could ensure that interventions remain closely aligned with evolving local needs and that the projects are genuinely participatory, enhancing both transparency and accountability. For instance, adding indicators that measure the levels of learning by participants post-training, the frequency and quality of community-led disaster response initiatives, or the degree of local governmental integration into disaster preparedness plans could provide a more nuanced understanding of the project impact. Such an approach would

ensure that capacity-building efforts are not only statistically successful but are also meaningful and sustainable, fostering a genuine advancement in community resilience that aligns with both local and broader developmental objectives.

Acted HQ reported that they have recently produced AGORA-specific, standardized MEAL indicators, which will be complementary to existing Acted MEAL indicators to better identify and monitor within project management logframes the soft activities essential to AGORA-enabled projects delivery. This additional set of indicators could be effective in ensuring qualitative and community-centered MEAL.

Further integration of CBOs into the learning, monitoring, and assessment stages could also enhance the participatory nature of AGORA throughout the project cycle. CBOs are vital for grounding the project in local realities and knowledge, so that interventions are not only relevant but also sustainably embedded within the community's social fabric.

Additionally, incorporating strategies like the NEAR Localized Funding Programme, which directly allocates resources to local and national actors, enhances the participatory nature of an approach in line with Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) principles.[134] This program is pivotal in increasing local ownership and accountability, which are crucial for ensuring that impact assessments accurately reflect both quantitative outcomes and qualitative improvements in community resilience and disaster preparedness. By embedding this or a similar funding strategy, Acted could further ensure that the project not only remains transparent but is also finely tuned to meet the evolving needs of the local communities, facilitating a truly participatory project cycle.[135]

5.6 Additional Areas of Analysis

5.6.1 Managing the Acted-IMPACT partnership

Both the Sri Lanka Acted and IMPACT teams highlighted that the relationship between the two organizations has been generally positive throughout the project. Nevertheless, the impact of differing operational approaches and timelines between Acted and IMPACT, as well as the broader tradeoff between timeliness and robust research, was cited as a key challenge for AGORA. Within tight project timelines, IMPACT would like more time to produce quality research, while Acted is eager for the research to be completed so implementation can begin. Managing this tension collaboratively and ensuring an effective partnership will be key to sustaining progress.

5.6.2 Staffing & supporting the Sri Lanka offices

The individual efforts, high level of commitment, and strong relationships with stakeholders and communities of field staff have clearly been pivotal in making progress on the project. The fact that many field staff have grown up in or around the communities that the AGORA project serves is critical to a level of trust and cultural sensitivity that cannot be taught.

Further, in the East, field staff highlighted that reliable institutional support from HQ and a positive work culture led by supportive managers have been essential to preparing them for their work and

mitigating the risks of burnout. Notably, Acted staff in both the North and the East generally reported finding training on AGORA and global level guidance to be useful and relevant.

5.6.3 Implementing the "P" of the HDP Nexus

In Sri Lanka (as at the global level, for both AGORA and the broader aid community), the inclusion of peacebuilding is a key challenge. Staff explain a limited focus on peace by noting that communities have identified priorities unrelated to peacebuilding; the key issues are DRR and livelihoods. However, when probed further, multiple interviews revealed that communities are still facing residual effects of the conflict, including perceived discrimination against certain groups, landmine contamination of fields that limit mobilization and reduce usable land, and subsequently reduced capacity to recover and create new livelihoods, especially for women and young people. Communities seem to have normalized these impacts, hindering the opportunity to identify such entry points for peacebuilding through the current data collection approach. Furthermore, there remains a potential for the AGORA project to unintentionally impact or ignore conflict triggers, especially given the nature of the local interface in bringing communities together, moderating disagreements, and deciding who will receive funding, which requires a conflict-sensitive approach. Of course, AGORA has been widely accepted by the communities for promising to address the most pressing needs, and the project should maintain its commitment to do so. However, without addressing root causes of vulnerability from a peacebuilding perspective, there is potentially a missed opportunity to promote greater social cohesion and/or the risk of solidifying the status quo and allowing grievances and inequalities to go unaddressed. Importantly, though, Acted HQ reported that incorporating such an element of addressing root causes is difficult to do in 2 years.

Given the ongoing legacy of armed conflict in Sri Lanka, dedicated expertise, analytical tools, and formal strategies for conflict sensitivity are critical. Conflict sensitivity is mainstreamed throughout the project informally, on the basis of local staff knowledge of the context, which is robust but nevertheless leaves room for missed opportunities. The formalization of a conflict analysis and sensitivity strategy could enable the project to embed "little p" peacebuilding activities where appropriate. For example, Acted is already consulting with leading de-mining actors in Sri Lanka, for both staff safety purposes and to support communities in advocating for prioritization in clearance where needed. This work could serve as an opportunity to both support livelihood resilience and recognize the ongoing legacies and historical memories of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on the implementation of the AGORA methodology across varied landscapes and communities, the AGORA experience follows a system-wide pattern of ambitious goals tempered by ongoing challenges of real-world application. Nevertheless, this methodology, with its foundational commitment to integrating humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding frameworks through a community driven and area based approach, offers an innovative model for contemporary aid delivery.

AGORA's strength is prominent in its ability to foster significant local engagement and capacity building. These efforts are not just about immediate aid but rather aimed at crafting enduring frameworks that empower communities to lead their own developmental journeys. The methodology's emphasis on local knowledge and capacities and linking with governance structures underscores a transformative shift from traditional top-down aid models to more inclusive, bottom-up approaches that respect and utilize local insights and expertise. Further, AGORA aligns well with good practices on implementing HDP and area based approaches, especially in linking humanitarian and development strategies and targeting aid at an effective territorial scale.

Even so, AGORA can evolve further to truly achieve its goal of providing more effective aid by: strengthening the peace component of the nexus; expanding coordination to achieve collective and holistic aid provision and advocacy; systematizing adaptability, flexibility, and risk mitigation; diversifying funding streams; and securing sustainability for the local interface and broader projects.

The journey of AGORA, as detailed through this report, provides critical lessons for the broader aid sector. It challenges traditional methodologies, advocates for a more evidence-based and participatory approach to aid, and highlights the importance of local leadership in sustainable international assistance. By continuing to innovate and adapt, AGORA can pave the way for a more responsive, effective, and inclusive approach to aid—one that genuinely embodies the principles of resilience, local empowerment, and sustainable change. As this methodology progresses, it will undoubtedly contribute to shaping a more equitable and effective global response system, tailored to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable populations while respecting their agency and aspirations.

Looking ahead, the potential for AGORA to learn from, feed into, and even shape global efforts to reform the aid system is significant. By refining its strategies, documenting lessons learned and continuing to build on its foundational principles of local engagement, participatory programming, and community-centered response, AGORA can serve as a model for new ways of doing humanitarian, development, and even peacebuilding work.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations to AGORA globally

- **Finalize and disseminate AGORA guidance as soon as possible.** In particular, prioritize the finalization of guidance notes on activities 2 (Map, profile, and assess territories), 7 (Build up local capacity), and 8 (Learning, impact assessment and monitoring). Clear guidance is necessary to ensure coherence and consistency in applying the AGORA methodology and to support IMPACT and Acted country teams in implementing AGORA successfully, especially under short timelines.

- **Establish formal guidance for determining AGORA's suitability for a particular context and applying flexibility where needed.** First, although AGORA offers unique strengths, it is not appropriate everywhere. Building on the broad categories for contexts where AGORA works well, Acted and IMPACT should collectively identify detailed indicators for AGORA's applicability. These indicators should reflect the existing proof of concept for AGORA and broader learning on the enabling conditions and risks for area based, community-driven, and HDP nexus approaches. Second, clear guidance on how to change the components, timelines, and sequencing of the AGORA methodology to suit project-specific conditions (such as a two-year timeline) will support staff in maximizing the benefit of AGORA based on what is feasible in their particular contexts.

- **Develop a formal peace engagement strategy to strengthen conflict sensitivity and explore opportunities for peacebuilding efforts.** Incorporate a formal conflict analysis into the early stages of the project cycle and formalize conflict sensitivity mainstreaming, including but not limited to developing project-specific "Do No Harm" strategies. Then, consider identifying areas where AGORA projects can contribute to strengthening social cohesion and local peacebuilding. Where suitable, integrate peacebuilding components and indicators into projects, potentially in partnership with local or international organizations with robust peacebuilding experience.

- **Institutionalize adaptability and flexibility in line with evolving conditions and possible shocks.** Actively monitor geographic contexts and establish processes for iterative adaptation, especially for when knowledge no longer reflects current conditions, such as after a disaster hits or needs and priorities change. This effort is particularly relevant for maintaining the efficacy of AGORA's area based approach, given that geographies and social relationships within territories are not static, especially in fragile contexts. An adaptive approach should be informed by continuous monitoring and learning, allowing for adjustment of strategies and activities in response to changing conditions and feedback. Further, Acted and IMPACT should ensure robust risk mitigation and contingency plans are in place to effectively respond to emerging risks.

- **Ensure a sufficient internal base of knowledge and expertise within AGORA projects.** Prioritize the recruitment of staff who have experience with at least two of the HDP nexus pillars, and who are familiar with lessons learned and good practices. This approach will

facilitate the effective implementation of AGORA projects and reduce the risk of teams defaulting to standard practices.

- **Strengthen integration between Acted and IMPACT teams.** Whilst AGORA gives clear guidance on the division of responsibilities between Acted and IMPACT, the relationship works best when there has been investment in strengthening coordination and integration between the two organizations. Greater integration can be facilitated through sensitizing Acted project staff to the purpose and added value of data and research, and jointly agreeing on project timelines. Further, given both Acted and IMPACT staff highlighted the importance of working as one team, a strong focus on relationship-building at the field level will be critical.

- **Leverage AGORA to improve and expand coordination with other actors.** Use the area based nature of AGORA to collaborate with other organizations in the same project territories and explore areas of complementarity. AGORA offers a distinct opportunity to not only avoid duplication but also advanced joined-up work to share knowledge and collectively provide a holistic approach to multi-sectoral needs. This coordination could reinforce the sustainability of projects and enable broader support to local interfaces where connected with other actors.

- **Position AGORA to develop a strategy to diversify funding streams and ensure sustainability.** Given the priority for flexibility in funding for AGORA projects, use the nexus focus of AGORA as an entry point to move beyond humanitarian funding and engage with development and peacebuilding donors, particularly those focused on crisis contexts and involved in anticipatory action funding. Other efforts to diversify funding sources could involve exploring innovative financing options such as risk financing mechanisms, crisis modifiers and adaptive social protection mechanisms that tap into rapid response funds.

- **Explore channels to coordinate on and connect local knowledge production with national and global actors and communities of practice.** Engage with other INGOs who employ similar methodological approaches and a DRR focus to build a collective pool of evidence and strategic information on lessons learned and best practices. Establish platforms to document and disseminate local knowledge generated through AGORA projects to a broader audience, particularly targeting policymakers and senior-level decision-makers and influencers at both national and international levels. Acted should facilitate the creation of these channels through a collaborative process with local partners, directly linking them to external actors and providing communities with opportunities to speak on their own behalf.

7.2 Recommendations to AGORA in Sri Lanka

Set up the local interface for success

- **Offer incentives for local interface participation.** Provide financial or other incentives to local interface members for their attendance at monthly meetings and cover their transportation costs to recognize that their time and participation are valued and to compensate for potential loss of earnings. Incentives will encourage consistent, reliable, and inclusive

participation; ensure that diverse local voices are represented in decision-making processes; build trust; and minimize harm.

- **Prioritize advocacy training for local interface members.** Conduct targeted advocacy training to help members mobilize resources and effectively promote their needs and priorities with government entities and external stakeholders. Such training will allow interface members to build self-reliance and expand their influence over the long-term.

- **Ensure the sustainability of the local interface, including after the AGORA project ends.** Create a sustainability strategy early on so that teams do not get so busy with implementation that they cannot dedicate the necessary time and attention. In this strategy, proactively consider ways to formalize the local interface (e.g., through registration) or plan annual meetings after the project ends to maintain its continuity. Additionally, share information about the local interface when coordinating with other aid actors so they can consider utilizing the interface for other projects and issues beyond DRR. Finally, review best practices for linking local communities to external stakeholders by other AGORA projects and identify which practices are applicable for Sri Lanka.

Expand coordination and advocacy efforts

- **Engage with USAID to convene coordination platforms for other DRR projects the organization funds in Sri Lanka.** Suggest and assess a range of coordination methods, including regular in-person meetings and/or ongoing data and information sharing. Given that USAID funds most DRR projects in the country, such coordination could enable Acted to benefit from and contribute to lessons learned and good practices specific to projects that share the constraints, timelines, and scope of USAID funding.

- **Invest in strengthening coordination through the existing INGO coordination platform.** Move beyond sharing updates to more proactively and systematically sharing data and lessons learned. With more strategic coordination, this platform could enable collective action, including for advocacy efforts, and collaboration on project interventions for more holistic responses.

- **Focus advocacy efforts with the government on investing in DRR beyond emergency response.** Use the project to show the government that anticipatory action actually saves money in the long run to incentivize authorities to take ownership of DRR, including after the project is over. Communities, especially in the North, reported that authorities remain resistant to funding anticipatory actions like repairing tanks due to economic limitations and are continuing to respond only after a disaster hits. Advocating for government investment and buy-in to DRR will thus be critical to the AGORA project's effectiveness and sustainability in Sri Lanka.

Explore opportunities for peace engagement

- **Secure the necessary institutional support and human resources to invest in the "peace" component of the HDP nexus.** Consult with Acted and IMPACT HQ to identify how the Sri Lanka staff could take the time and hire additional capacity to ensure the AGORA project is most

effectively applying the HDP nexus approach. While recognizing that local interface members will retain the responsibility for identifying their own needs and priorities, Acted may also consider preparing contextually-appropriate and conflict-sensitive suggestions for incorporating peacebuilding. Suggestions could include connecting demining programs with livelihood resilience or leveraging the Women, Peace, and Security or Youth, Peace, and Security agendas to address the specific needs and lingering trauma of particularly vulnerable populations.

- **Invest to enhance the potential of the local interface to build social cohesion and plan for potential tensions.** The positive experiences of local interface members thus far demonstrate the opportunity for the AGORA project to improve social cohesion between and within communities. Acted should strategize this element of the local interface more explicitly, such as by using the local interface as an entry point to address ongoing discrimination post-conflict. Relatedly, field staff should more proactively plan risk mitigation strategies in the case that disagreements during interface meetings escalate or the provision of aid and opportunities to some but not all individuals and CBOs triggers grievances.

Ensure a sustainable, participatory approach to implementation

- **Center a partnership with CEFE Net that is built on mutual trust and engagement as peers.** While CEFE Net is involved in the training and capacity building component of the project, the principles and good practices of equal partnerships would indicate that involving CEFE Net in discussions on the wider project, especially related to localization and sustainability efforts, would be beneficial, for both the partnership and the project itself. CEFE Net appears to have a positive view of Acted and the partnership, so there is a valuable opportunity to build on this goodwill and work with CEFE Net as more than just an "implementing partner."

- **Broaden the monitoring framework to include qualitative indicators.** Qualitative indicators could capture detailed community feedback to better evaluate the relevance and impact of training programs and other interventions. Qualitative indicators can thus equip teams to ensure that CBOs participate in both the design and monitoring stages and that interventions effectively address the specific needs and priorities of the communities served.

- **Review implementation of global guidance on implementing assistance early on.** In Sri Lanka, there was an opportunity to provide small-scale assistance during the initial phases, in line with global guidance, as a way to provide a concrete benefit for participation in the assessments and to start implementation sooner so as to increase the effectiveness of interventions. Ultimately, this implementation did not occur. The Sri Lanka and HQ teams should collectively review why this was a case, to potentially strengthen guidance to further foster early interventions where appropriate.

- **Plan ahead for internal discussions on sustainability and exit strategies.** Though the AGORA project remains in the early stages of a pilot, field teams should not wait until the final phase of the project to make decisions on how to transition interventions and ensure their long-term impact. By investing time and human resources in these discussions sooner rather than later, field teams will be better able to lay the groundwork for sustainability throughout implementation and to meaningfully consult with local stakeholders in the process.

Annex A: List of Key Informant Interviewees

International NGOs
- World Vision
- Oxfam
- Search for Common Ground
- Global Communities
- Mercy Corps
- Aga Khan
- Peace Direct

National NGOs
- Somalia Nexus Consortium
- Abs Yemen
- International Council for Voluntary Agencies (IVCA)

UN Entities
- OCHA
- IASC Task Force 4 on the Nexus
- UNDP Nexus Academy
- UN RCO Ukraine

Donors
- World Bank
- USAID (HQ and Sri Lanka)
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Annex B: Note on Data Privacy and Protection

Overview
As part of ensuring a Do No Harm approach, the capstone team is committed to data ethics for the entirety of the project. To this end, the team will follow the recommendations of the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University and the Acted memo on "personally identifiable information (PII) data protection process," to the extent that these guidelines are applicable. Aligned with Acted's approach, the team is committed to the strictest confidentiality and standards of professionalism.

Fieldwork coordinators Andrea Garcia-Ochoa Lee (ag4687@columbia.edu) and Dalia Atallah (da2999@columbia.edu) have primary responsibility for overseeing the data management plan, inclusive of data privacy and protection. Nonetheless, all team members are expected to ensure compliance with this plan and with data ethics.

For the purposes of this note, proprietary information (PI) will be defined according to the Acted NDA: "the Recipient project documents, components, parts, information, data, databases, drawings, sketches, plans programs, specifications, techniques, processes, software, inventions and other materials, both written and oral, of a secret, confidential or proprietary nature, including without limitation any and all information relating to project activities, project beneficiaries, marketing, finance, forecasts, invention, research, design or development of information system and any supportive or incidental subsystems, and any and all subject matter claimed in or disclosed by any patent application prepared or filed by or behalf of by Acted, in any jurisdiction, and any amendments or supplements thereto."

Protecting Personally Identifiable Information (PII) & Collecting and Storing Data Responsibly
In accordance with the definition of PII in Acted's Data Protection Policy, the only PII that the team will collect will be directly relevant to the project objectives. During fieldwork in Sri Lanka, the team collected 1) information on the main ethnic groups within the area in which an interview took place, only when explicitly mentioned as relevant by the interviewees, and 2) photographs with the interviewers and interviewees after receiving verbal consent. In the end, the team decided not to use photos collected in the field for the final report, so the photos will not be used for the purposes of the research project.

During the KIIs conducted in New York, the team has collected names and contact information (primarily email addresses, as well as a few telephone numbers) during the outreach process. The team will not be using individual names or sharing contact information in our final deliverables.

During all KIIs and focus group discussions (FGDs), conducted both remotely and in Sri Lanka, the team ensured a standard of informed consent to be sure that all participants were appropriately aware of the planned use of the information collected. The team was clear that the purpose of the interviews and fieldwork was to conduct research on AGORA.

Data is primarily collected on laptops and saved to a Google Drive folder restricted to members of the team. Some data during the fieldwork was collected on paper and will be digitized within a week of returning from the fieldwork. Physical notes will then be discarded securely. At the end of the project, team members will store the data on an external hard drive [MR1] [LS2] and delete the Google Drive. The external hard drive will be left with SIPA Senior Assistant Dean Suzanne Hollman, who manages the capstone, and if no information from the hard drive is needed within a year, she will delete the files.

Analyzing & Sharing Data Responsibly
The team will anonymize data received by aggregating overarching themes and takeaways and by noting that these findings come from KIIs with UN agencies, INGOs, local agencies, and donors as well as fieldwork KIIs and FGDs with Acted and IMPACT staff, national and local authorities, (I)NGO Sri Lanka offices, and project participants.

If in the process of writing, the team finds that attribution from a KII would be useful (i.e. to mention the individual or the organization by name), the team would first consult with the particular interviewee to obtain consent. The team explained this approach at the beginning of each KII to ensure all were comfortable with this plan. The team also noted that as of now, the final report will remain internal to Acted and IMPACT staff, but if the decision is made to share the report with all interviewees and project stakeholders or to make the report public, the team will alert interviewees and allow them to withdraw responses or request further data anonymization as needed. Ultimately, the final report will be the property of Acted.

The team will not share data, documents, or other information regarding the project outside of the team members, SIPA staff members involved in the capstone project (i.e. for the midterm presentation), or Acted and IMPACT staff. If a need for externally sharing arises, the team will first consult with Acted. The midterm presentation provided an overview of the project's progress; some preliminary, aggregated results from the literature review; and preparations for the fieldwork with three panelists.

Finally, the title to any property received by the team from Acted, including all Proprietary info, shall remain in Acted's sole property.

Aligning with the Acted Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA)
In the spirit of a NDA, the team will demonstrate respect for Acted's partnership and transparency in sharing proprietary information for the purposes of the project. The team agrees to maintain the confidentiality of this proprietary information by:
- Not disclosing any proprietary information received throughout the capstone project to anyone outside the first intended recipients when Acted/IMPACT shared the information, unless agreed in advance in writing with Acted;
- Deleting all proprietary information (including project documents [MR3] [LS4] and notes from interviews with Acted and IMPACT staff, inclusive of those shared via email or other means) and sharing written confirmation [MR5] [LS6] that all team members certify on their honor that they have deleted all data/databases, including Confidential/Proprietary

Information and all variants thereof, which were given to them, as well as any copies thereof with Acted within one month of submitting the final deliverable to Acted;

- Responding in detail to any concerns or requests for information from Acted regarding the use of proprietary information within 5 working days.

The team recognizes that all proprietary information remains the property of Acted.

Endnotes

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4. Poole, Lydia, and Vance Culbert. "Financing the Nexus: Gaps and Opportunities from a Field Perspective." Interagency Standing Committee, July 9, 2019. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2019-07/financing_the_nexus_report.pdf.

5. Key Informant Interview with INGO D, February 13, 2024. Interestingly, one interviewee affiliated with UN Entity A suggested the nexus concept has simply replaced the "resilience" concept as the latest iteration in the international aid industry's buzzword.

6. Key Informant Interview with INGO C, February 9, 2024.

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8. Key Informant Interview with UN Entity D, February 8, 2024.

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13. CDA Collaborative. "Do No Harm: A Brief Introduction from CDA," January 2018. https://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Do-No-Harm-A-Brief-Introduction-from-CDA.pdf.

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16. Key Informant Interview with INGO F, February 26, 2024.

17. Leah Zamore, "The Triple Nexus in Practice: Toward a New Way of Working in Protracted and Repeated Crises" (NYU Center on International Cooperation, December 2019).

18. *Ibid.*

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21. Key Informant Interview with UN Entity A, February 9, 2024

22. "Guidance Note Advancing The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Approach Through IASC Global Clusters." Interagency Standing Committee, December 2023. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/IASC%20Guidance%20Note%2C%20Advancing%20the%20Humanitarian%20Development%20Peace%20Nexus%20Approach%20through%20IASC%20Global%20Clusterss.pdf.

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