



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

EMPOWERING LOCAL ACTORS BY PRIORITISING LOCAL CAPACITY AND NETWORKS: POLAND'S SOLIDARITY FUND

Key messages

Through the Solidarity Fund, Poland aims to work closely with local partners to contribute to more systemic change. Relying on a strong country presence and local staff to work with its partners, the Solidarity Fund prioritises local capacity and networks to support local solutions.

Keywords

Civil society | Institutional arrangement | Partnerships | Locally led development

Key partner

Poland

Challenge

Based on its own transition experience, Poland's approach to development co-operation recognises that meaningful democratic reforms require working at the local level and across society to build support and lasting change. This requires strong local networks that can work with development partners to design, manage and implement locally relevant solutions based on a genuine sense of agency.

Approach

The Solidarity Fund – a State Treasury foundation since 2011 – has the unique capacity in Polish Aid of being able to sub-grant to local partners. It works to empower local actors to play the leading role in the development of their own societies. To achieve this, the Solidarity Fund:

- **Invests in country presence and local staff:** Three local representative offices have been established: in [Moldova](#) in 2012 and [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#) in 2019. Except for country directors, these offices are staffed by nationals of the respective countries. Investment in local staff generates ownership and commitment, supports the development of local networks, and builds trust with local and central administrations.

- **Supports methodologies that are local by design:** In Moldova, the Solidarity Fund is a key actor in delivering the European Union's [LEADER approach](#) to rural development. This approach relies on partnerships of local actors to actively shape rural development policies. In Ukraine, the Solidarity Fund draws where relevant on Poland's own experience while maximising local networks to stimulate reforms in social policy, vocational education, civil protection and governance.
- **Embeds local staff in partner institutions:** The Solidarity Fund transfers part of its staff to work in newly created or relevant existing institutions to transfer expertise, based on local employment and salary conditions. Staff often remain in the institution, helping to embed capabilities.
- **Develops a method that generates citizens' and institutions' co-responsibility for development processes:** The Solidarity Fund's phased methodology includes exit by design. This includes a *pilot phase*, involving regular dialogue with local communities, authorities and local civil society organisations; an *implementation phase* of building state actors' and social partners' project management capacities; and an *institutionalisation phase*, empowering local partners to influence policy making within the country's institutional and legal framework. The *embedding phase* involves defining exit conditions that ensure locally developed solutions are co-owned and managed by national counterparts.

Results

- **Local partners strengthen their capacity:** The [National LEADER Network Moldova](#) acquired capacity to diversify its financial resources, including from other donors and the national budget. Through urban regeneration projects, Moldovan officials also strengthened their competences in urban planning and implementing regeneration processes.
- **Local authorities and actors build networks and are better able to participate in and influence national decision-making processes.** In Moldova, Regional Development Agencies worked with the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment to develop national "[Guidelines for urban regeneration](#)". In 2020, 13 cities involved in urban revitalisation projects supported by the Solidarity Fund founded the National Urban Revitalization Network to collectively promote sustainable urban development tools across Moldova. In Georgia, a locally established "[Academy of Local Self-Governance](#)" launched training on cross-sectoral communication and inclusive local decision making.
- **National authorities buy into locally designed development instruments:** Moldova became the first non-EU country to finance Local Action Groups from the state budget and to implement the LEADER programme as a public policy tool. In Ukraine, from 2024, the Ministry of Social Policy and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs will co-finance locally managed psychosocial support centres for war victims which were co-created and piloted by local actors and the Solidarity Fund.

Lessons learnt

- **By focusing on its strong local presence and bottom-up approach the Solidarity Fund fills a gap at country level.** Its strong local networks and bottom-up approach set it apart from other actors. Other donors seek to partner with it due to this comparative advantage.
- **Working almost entirely with local staff and through local partners can result in lower overhead costs.** A larger share of project funding reaches beneficiaries, creating potential for greater development impact through effectiveness and quality. Lower overhead costs also make the Solidarity Fund an attractive implementing partner for other donors.
- **Offering local employment conditions for staff embedded in local partner organisations encourages their integration into local administrations at the end of a project.** This can, however, also generate trade-offs between the need to attract capable staff to the Solidarity Fund by providing higher salaries while preserving the incentives for local staff to remain in the partner institution when the support by the Solidarity Fund ends.
- **Designing effective exit strategies can be challenging.** Ensuring the sustainability of projects in countries with very limited administrative capacity and high levels of emigration is a major challenge. The final “embedding” phase is therefore still a work in progress.
- **The large degree of flexibility at country level is critical to the Solidarity Fund’s experimental approach, but requires effective governance.** Balancing flexibility at country level with priorities and goals set at headquarters – across both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Solidarity Fund – requires effective co-ordination and open communication.
- **Challenges in mobilising specific expertise from the Polish administration can be a barrier.** The Solidarity Fund’s model relies in part on mobilising technical expertise and knowledge from the Polish public administration and applying it in support of locally designed solutions in partner countries. Pressures on staff availability and bureaucracy makes this more challenging.

Further information

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To learn more about Poland's development co-operation see:

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See more *In Practice* examples from Poland here: www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning?tag-key+partner=poland#search

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