

WE, MAJORITY WORLD ACTORS...

HOW TO ORGANISE INTERNATIONAL EVENTS AND CONVENINGS: A GUIDANCE NOTE FROM LOCAL ACTORS

Facilitated by Movement for Community-Led Development, CIVICUS, and Peace Direct.

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Introduction



In November 2023, almost two thousand Majority World actors [penned a letter](#) to funders and convenors of international conferences on how to organise spaces and conversations on locally-led development. This letter was born out of their lived experience and the frustration and humiliation of seeking access to a table that was allegedly designed for them and yet excluded them. The letter laid out the following five principles for convenors and funders who were committed to convening dialogues and spaces to operationalise locally-led development.

1. Ensure local actors are at the table

Move beyond a few token representatives from the Majority World to have equal representation of local- and community-based organisations in decision-making.

2. Ensure we have access to the table

Hold convenings in countries where Majority World actors can more easily obtain visas.

3. Respect our participation

Provide sufficient notice and full sponsorship, including visa, accommodation, meal/per diem and entry fee costs, upfront so that local organisations can participate.

4. Speak in a language that we understand

Have simultaneous translation, use accessible language in all materials, and have physical access for people with disabilities so people from different contexts can participate.

5. Set the agenda with us

Co-create the agenda and co-host with local and community-based organisations and their networks.

The letter was met with widespread support and resulted in calls for greater guidance from Majority World actors on how these convenings should be organised. In response to this call, The Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD), CIVICUS and Peace Direct worked with Majority World signatories of the original letter to co-create a guidance document. This guidance note was born out of listening sessions in multiple languages and a conversation carried out on a multilingual online platform called Platform4Dialogue during the months of February and March 2024. 310 people participated in the listening sessions and the online consultation. In addition to these steps, a survey was sent to convenors and organisers of dialogues and events to understand the barriers that they faced or could face in designing events on locally-led development, with local actors, by local actors and for local actors.

This document captures the learning from these consultations as recommendations that all convenors and funders should consider while planning events in general, but particularly those on locally-led development. It is based not just on the barriers faced by local actors, but their vision of how they would organise such events. This document has been co-created by Majority World actors (see list at the end of the document) and is owned by every participant involved in the process.

The last few years have strongly demonstrated that despite an intent to become locally-led among many funders

and actors, as evidenced by the [Donor Statement on Locally-led Development](#) and the [Pledge for Change](#), entrenched power imbalances continue to side-line local actors in conversations about them. Local actors often feel unheard and excluded from agenda-setting or discussions in convenings around localisation due to dominance by international actors or funders. To create an environment more conducive to meaningful participation, conferences should shift towards genuine partnerships with local actors. This includes actively involving them in planning stages, ensuring clear communication about conference goals, and prioritising strong feedback mechanisms. We realise that systemic transformation is a journey and our intent in this document is to serve as allies to funders and convenors as they find ways to become more locally-led in their ways of thinking, being and doing.

Must-do Recommendations

In the spirit of “nothing about us, without us,” convenings on locally-led development should be led by Majority World actors with active support and funding from Minority World/Global North actors. However, we recognise that this may not always be possible, particularly in the skewed system that is currently operational. This guidance document offers recommendations that we consider

must-dos. They reflect changes that need to be made immediately to address power imbalances and offer steps all convenors must take if they are serious about locally-led development and intend to operationalise the five principles outlined by Majority World actors in their letter.

For ease of use, the recommendations have been clustered into three groups: pre-event, during event and post-event.

Further, while these must-do recommendations are an important starting point to make convenings more inclusive and respectful, they are not enough. Additional suggestions on making the convenings truly locally-led are provided in blue boxes at the end of each section. We, Majority World actors, recognise that transformation cannot happen overnight. Many of these changes are resource intensive and may not be immediately possible. We also recognise that depending on the size of the gathering, its purpose and urgency, not all of these additional suggestions will always be possible or even needed. We have therefore framed these additional suggestions as questions that organisers should continue to ask themselves, understanding that the answers may differ by situation. After all, context matters.

Before Event: Local Actors co-design a table that is inclusive, accessible and relevant

As laid out in the Majority World letter, true locally-led development is about ensuring that diverse Majority World actors are not just given a few seats at the table, but are part of designing the table. Majority World actors should play a prominent role in the conceptualising, designing and implementing convenings to ensure that they are inclusive and cater to the needs and priorities of grassroots communities.

Must-Dos

Framing the when, where, why and for whom

- Purpose and Participation:** Clearly communicate the purpose, goals and expected outcomes of the conference on the invitation/website/related documents, in multiple languages, alongside a transparent process for the selection of speakers, sessions and sponsored participants.
- Hosting:** Always consider partnering with a local organisation or network to host the conference even if the convening is being held in the Minority World (Global North).
- Timing:** Choose a date at least 4-6 months away, and if possible, longer. Ensure participants are confirmed at least 3 months before conference date to enable travel and visa planning. For annual events, consider fixed dates (each year, every # of years) so people can plan for it in advance.
- Location:** For in-person global events, choose a country with low barriers to entry, and which doesn't pose a risk to participants in terms of their safety and identity. Remember, visas remain one of the biggest barriers for Majority World participants. Weigh the merits of virtual and hybrid versus in-person consultations. Similarly, consider regional convenings. These provide greater access to Majority World actors and also reduce our carbon footprint.

Ensuring Access to the Table

- Registration:** Clearly spell out the selection criteria for participation, costs, and what will be covered under financial support. Application questions should not be time intensive – ideally, they should take no more than 60 minutes to fill out. Providing a simplified and user-friendly application form, with the option to save progress and complete it in multiple stages is also helpful.
- Wide and Intentional Outreach:** All outreach should be in multiple languages, through simple documents, and across broad channels of communication including websites, social media platforms, and networks/consortiums of CSOs. Language access can be expensive, but at a minimum ensure materials in the official UN languages and the predominant language of the region where the event is being held, particularly if it is in the Majority World. Actively seek out voices that are less heard reflecting an intersectional lens. Women from the Majority World, minorities, persons living with disabilities, the elderly, youth and indigenous peoples from different countries offer diverse perspectives. Invite a wide range of groups, particularly those based outside the major cities, to submit calls

for papers and participate in panels, with a transparent and clear selection process. And finally, remember that questions around experience can be a deterrent for the youth.

- Selection Processes:** Invite local actors from the Majority World to be part of the selection committee to ensure diversity in voices. Invite Majority World networks to identify/select speakers from their contexts rather than Minority World conveners inviting those they already know.
- Financial Support:** Cover all or most of the conference registration fees, airfare, visa fees, accommodation, meals and incidentals, SIM cards or communications, and insurance for Majority World actors. Cover travel expenses to and from the airport, depending on flight schedules, as some Majority World actors have to travel long distances to get to the international airport. Make flight and accommodation bookings for participants instead of reimbursing them because such upfront costs can be prohibitive. Recognise that visa costs extend beyond the fee for the visa, and include travel to consulates (sometimes in third countries), postage and photos, etc. Clearly state what costs will be covered and what will not (e.g. if the visa is rejected, will visa fees, flight and hotel cancellation costs be reimbursed?), to enable Majority World participants to make an informed decision regarding participation. Include the cost for accompanying persons with disabilities, as needed.
- Logistics Support:** Provide detailed instructions for how to prepare, how to travel, and how to participate. Offer a help desk to support participants with the visa application process, book flights in consultation with local actors (keeping in mind the need for transit visas and

Should-dos 1: How do we design virtual and hybrid events that are inclusive and accessible?

- Ensure that the timings work for Majority World actors. Communicate time in different time zones or with UTC/GMT. Break the event into multiple days. Avoid Fridays, as it is a holiday in many countries.
- Consider session size and platforms that are not heavy on data use and easy to navigate. Choose an interactive platform and provide step-by-step guides on how to navigate them and where possible offer practice sessions (with a shared login as many tools require purchase).
- Ensure the guidance available is for both computers and mobiles, particularly android devices and in multiple languages.
- Consider refunds for internet and data.
- Ensure all conference materials are shared well in advance and in multiple languages.
- If you ask participants to submit questions in advance, make sure those questions are addressed during the event.
- Create networking spaces on multi-lingual platforms or opt-in LinkedIn and WhatsApp groups enabling remote participants to connect with in-person ones.
- Email the recording to registered participants who could not attend due to technical challenges, time zone challenges or time poverty constraints.

In addition to these, for hybrid events:

- Ensure that the sessions are balanced (not all Majority World participants are online and Minority World/ Global North in-person). Where budgets are limited, consider sponsoring new participants from the Majority World to attend in-person sessions and encouraging previous participants to join virtually.
- Ensure that the event design does not make remote participants feel like token participants; intentionally build them into the agenda.
- Pay attention to language access and translation between in-person and virtual segments.

minimising steps and visas for local actors), and support accommodation bookings. Provide an information guide on immigration processes, airport support and protocol, and local transportation, as well as weather and appropriate clothing, food considerations, etc. Recognise that these steps may be unfamiliar

and uncomfortable for some participants and easing the process is important to them feeling welcome and present. A pre-arrival briefing meeting or video to cover this information could be helpful.

Should-dos 2: What other steps can we take to make in-person convenings more accessible?

- Determine whether a global, regional or local meeting is required. Convening events at regional and local levels is more likely to encourage participation by Majority World actors. Planning events by region could also minimise costs and carbon footprint. If you are planning a global event, choose a country that is peaceful and safe (especially for activists oppressed because of their views) and where barriers to entry are low, such as Mauritius.
- For events that are held on a regular basis (e.g. annually), consider holding them among member countries on a rotational basis, prioritising those that have minimal barriers to entry.
- Provide transportation to and from the airport and the conference venue/hotel, particularly for delegates arriving late at night or early in the morning. Transport systems are different in different countries and not everyone knows how to navigate them or has credit cards/funds to pay for tickets.
- Ensure detailed information about visa processes to enable participants to understand the time and probability of getting a visa. Offer readily available contact points for any inquiries

participants might have. If possible, and where options exist, support participants in getting a multiple entry visa, particularly for Schengen states.

- Ensuring accommodations, such as crèche facilities for parents, demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and respect for diverse needs and preferences.
- Identify the different areas that would best be spoken about by those directly affected. Realise that although they are representing a marginalised community, Majority World actors are also individuals with their own experiences and should not feel pressure to speak on behalf of their community. Reach out beforehand to see the roles they would like to play and the areas they would like to participate in.
- Reach out to organisations that work with affected or marginalised populations and request connections or nominations of individuals.
- Encourage a gender balance in participation.
- Ensure the venue is accessible (easy to find, ramp and/or elevator access, easy to navigate).

Setting the Agenda with Majority World Actors

1. Prioritise diversity in the planning committee to ensure representation from different regions and perspectives. And ensure that Majority World actors involved in planning are compensated as a mark of respect for their knowledge and time. This would ensure that the planning committee would also have a better understanding of the types of support needed, including financial and travel logistics.
2. Use a consultative process to set and co-own agendas, create equal spaces, and identify speakers with local actors. This can be done in creative and collaborative ways including pre-event surveys and consultations, through local networks and by forming groups of grassroots civil society organisations in advance to coordinate the planning.

Should-dos 3: What additional steps do we need to take in advance to ensure the health, safety and well-being of participants at in-person convenings?

- Share possible vaccine information in advance so that participants have time to seek out medical requirements. Outline a plan for the health and safety of participants including plans for organisers to cover expenses for hospital visits. Depending on the context, share how the organisers have ensured a safe environment for participants, including COVID-19 protocols and local travel arrangements.
- Create spaces for relaxation, well-being and peer support to acknowledge the potential stress and overwhelm experienced by participants, particularly those attending conferences for the first time or from challenging contexts. For example, The Shift The Power conference in Bogotá in 2023 had a place to doze off and nice hammocks; Women Deliver in Rwanda in 2023 had a quiet room, prayer spaces and a counsellor at hand. Consider a peer support desk and a medical emergency desk. Ensure that participants know that it is not mandatory to attend every event and panel.

Respecting Our Participation: Intentional Inclusion and Active Participation

1. **Power Dynamics:** Incorporate ways to avoid marginalisation of perspectives from the Majority World at each step of the event. Consider the less obvious power dynamics. Country offices of international NGOs cannot and should not fill the role of local or national organisations nor should government-sponsored delegates from the Majority World. Advocate for the recognition, legitimacy, and space for grassroots/local civil society organisations.
2. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Cultural support/integration is crucial for creating an inclusive and respectful conference environment, especially for participants coming from regions with ongoing conflicts or diverse cultural backgrounds. Some participants coming from the Majority World may be travelling outside of their home country for the first time and may experience culture shock. International conveners should approach with caution and understanding for participants from restrictive civil society spaces or conflict-affected regions. They should include notes about dress codes in the briefing materials to ensure that participants understand that they are welcome to wear formal or casual attire (as the case may be) from their own cultures. Briefing materials should also provide information about the weather and specify if the venue will have air conditioning or heating so that participants can be comfortable. Many first-time delegates are unsure of what to expect at international convenings.
3. **Building Connections:** Consider opportunities for pre-event meetings to facilitate connections and trust in advance.
4. **Care and well-being:** Jet lag and long-distance travel can be exhausting, more so for first-time travellers. Where budgets permit, consider adding an additional night before the convening for participants to settle in and fully participate in events. For participants coming from areas of active conflict (e.g. Palestine, DRC, Niger, Ukraine), create a contingency plan in case they are unable to travel back to their home country/city due to escalation of conflict, border issues etc. Ensure that they have accommodation and funds to cover any unanticipated extended stays.
5. **Intentional Inclusion:** Ensure bathroom access for People with Disabilities and LGBTQI+ participants and where possible sensitise local staff, particularly when holding events in spaces or countries that are increasingly restrictive for LGBTQI+ communities.

During Event: Safe, inclusive and accessible spaces for all participants

Must-Dos

Ensuring Access during the event

- 1. Language:** Ensure there is translation in multiple languages, real time captioning (for virtual events) and sign language interpretation. Find ways to help people feel comfortable with translation, rather than feeling obliged or pressured to use the conference language. Encourage people to speak in their native tongue beyond having translation available, e.g. by asking everyone to say hello or goodbye in their own language, having the moderator speak in their native language, having different sessions with different primary languages (and translation). Consider what language a majority of participants share for the primary language, whether or not it is the hosts' native language.
- 2. Materials:** Materials before, during, and after the convening should also be translated and shared in advance to help people become more familiar with the terminology, including the translators themselves. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms in conference materials - remember most people will be reading these in languages that are not their first or second language.
- 3. Accessibility:** Accessibility measures including disability accommodations, real-time captioning, and international sign language interpretation need to be in place, not just for the plenary but for all sessions. Transportation and accommodation plans also need to consider mobility and accessibility challenges.

Designing safe and inclusive spaces

- 1. Safe spaces:** Build in spaces where it is safe to share without self-censorship. This may require spaces without funders or government representatives (with a readout to them after the fact). Note the risks that some advocates and activists might face when speaking out

honestly. Activists, who have security concerns and a need for anonymity, need to be protected at events to safely continue their crucial work. Consider adding tags or stickers for those who do not wish to be photographed or recorded. Read out a code of conduct or set of standards before the meeting begins (e.g. zero tolerance on harassment, etc.)

- 2. Dealing with stress:** Support the mental health and well-being of participants through spaces for relaxation, mindfulness activities, and mental health resources to support participants in managing any stress or fatigue they may experience during the event.
- 3. Encourage connections:** Creating networks, increasing visibility and building solidarity are some of the key reasons why Majority World actors participate in global convenings. Therefore, conveners should facilitate opportunities for networking outside of panels that support people who may not know others at the conference to speak with and get to know a range of people (not just open coffee breaks or happy hours)
- 4. Session Format:** Shift the focus away from select keynote speakers and build more time for cross-learning and reflection between participants.
- 5. Inclusive Facilitation:** Facilitators should encourage diverse perspectives and actively listen, to ensure that participants feel valued and respected. They must give time for participants to share their experiences and let others reflect and chime in, so that participants are able to learn from and about each other. This is best done in smaller groups, where good facilitation cultivates vulnerability and empathy and builds relationships. Consider having Majority World facilitators at events alongside those from the Minority World/Global North.

Should-dos 4: How do we ensure meaningful participation of Majority World actors during in-person events?

- All relevant documents, including the conference agenda and schedule, concept note, role of and expectations for participants, opportunities to speak and host sessions, a sense of who else is invited, what is needed to attend (including logistics), and invitation letter should be provided well in advance (3 months is ideal) to enable Majority World actors to decide if they should attend the meeting and to plan their travel.
- Critical conference documents like concept note, agenda and schedule should be translated into the official UN languages at the minimum and shared at the earliest. As representatives of wider communities, this also allows time for participants to get inputs from communities, colleagues, etc. so they can help represent their ideas.
- Consider access beyond UN languages- e.g. Swahili or Pigeon English or Ewe depending on where the conference is being organised. Try to use local interpreters; make sure interpreters are able to familiarise themselves with the theme and key vocabulary beforehand. Ensure simultaneous interpretation is available not just in the plenary but also in breakout rooms.
- Remember that gestures and facial expressions mean different things in different languages/cultures.
- Establish and circulate clear guidelines for respectful communication, which encourages diverse perspectives, provides opportunities for all participants to share their expertise and ensures all contributions are acknowledged and appreciated.
- Quotas that limit the number of INGO and government participants help prioritise the voices and perspectives of grassroots and community-based organisations
- Intentionally create spaces to showcase local organisations' work and share success stories. Create alternate spaces for participation, including submitting materials in advance, like letters, petitions, podcasts or videos, for participants who are unable to get a speaking role.
- Facilitate interactive spaces for connecting (including explicitly across countries and cultures, and in ways that support people who don't know each other or know others at the convening to connect) instead of only prioritising plenary sessions.
- Build more types of small meetings (like fireside chats, workshops) into the agenda to cater to diverse learning styles and types of relationship building. Include spaces for soft skills building, networking, conversations with funders, activities that bridge the gap between different types of organisations and organisations from different regions. Move away from traditional lectures and panels.
- Provide spaces for participants to express themselves in alternate ways, such as writing, drawing, or artistic presentations, to ensure greater participation, particularly from people who may not be very confident or comfortable with public speaking.
- Having a strong moderator is key to neutralising power dynamics.
- Cultural interludes like traditional dances and music from participant countries make participants feel more connected and comfortable. When conferences are held in the Majority World, consider including visits to communities or local organisations that support community-led work.
- Create spaces for intergenerational dialogue and knowledge exchange to ensure that the learning needs of delegates are met. Consider introducing mentorship programs where experienced Majority World practitioners can guide first time conference attendees and create opportunities for youth.
- The set-up of spaces and rooms matters to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Consider the accessibility of the format and inclusivity of the space, especially for people with disabilities.
- Less is more - often conferences are packed and too fast-paced. Reduce the amount of curated and fixed content to allow space for assimilation, networking and well-being.

Should-dos 4 (Continued): How do we ensure meaningful participation of Majority World actors during in-person events?

- Establish regular check-ins and multiple ways for participants to share concerns or ask questions without feeling insignificant or marginalised.
- Build in time at the end/on the last day to find solutions and commitments and ensure the objectives of a conference are met. If they are not met, determine what the next steps are at this time.
- Ensure sensitivity to cultural and religious practices, particularly for participants from diverse backgrounds. This could involve offering prayer spaces, accommodating dietary restrictions and ensuring food stations are clearly marked (e.g. vegetarian, halal), and respecting religious observances such as Ramadan. For example, The WomenLift Health Conference in Tanzania in 2024 made iftaar available to all participants as it was held during the month of Ramadan.
- For accountability and transparency, follow-up with all participants to share developments since the conference, including how and whether the goals were achieved. Capture discussions and facilitate follow-up with a clear timeline and plan of action.
- Setting up focus groups during the event for ongoing engagement helps maintain momentum and accountability beyond the conference itself.
- Facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange between local conferences in different regions to elevate their collective impact.
- Clearly spell out key performance indicators (KPIs) for the event and share this information with all participants to demonstrate a commitment to inclusion. These indicators may include the number of participants from the 'Majority World', their level of engagement, the diversity of represented perspectives, and tangible outcomes achieved through the conference.

AFTER

After Event: Intentional Feedback and Follow-up

Local Actors at the Table: What comes next

1. **Clarity on the process:** Offering clear communication at the start about how the information emerging from the event will be used and the steps for follow-up is crucial for building trust and accountability.
2. **Follow-up mechanisms:** Developing follow up mechanisms such as post-conference reports, access to recorded sessions, online platforms that participants can engage with after the conference concludes, sharing of resources/reports, and where possible and desired by participants, an opt-in space for continued collaboration ensures that participants have ongoing opportunities to stay informed and engaged.
3. **Closing the feedback loop:** Closing the feedback loop by encouraging and sharing feedback from participants, as well as informing them of any actions taken based on that feedback, promotes transparency and demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement.

Conclusion

This document is a compilation of guidance from Majority World actors on how to address power inequities in events. It calls for inclusion, equitable partnerships and transparency. We recognise that different convening spaces have different objectives and often need to be tailored to those. We also recognise that size and available resources play a huge role in the design of convening spaces. These guidelines are designed to enable conveners to think deeply about the principles and values that underpin the spaces that they facilitate. To move from thinking about events and conferences as one off gatherings to intentional spaces that build connection and collective action and enable us to challenge the power inequities prevalent in our system.

We, Majority World actors, welcome continued discussion on these recommendations as we work together to operationalise the suggestions laid out in our letter.



ENSURE LOCAL ACTORS ARE AT THE TABLE



ENSURE WE HAVE ACCESS TO THE TABLE



RESPECT OUR PARTICIPATION



SPEAK IN A LANGUAGE THAT WE UNDERSTAND



SET THE AGENDA WITH US

LIST OF CO-CREATORS

Hundreds of co-creators were involved in the creation of this document. The full list of names is available at: <http://mcd.org/how-to-organise-international-events-and-convenings>

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